VASILY AKSYONOV

# COLLEAGUES

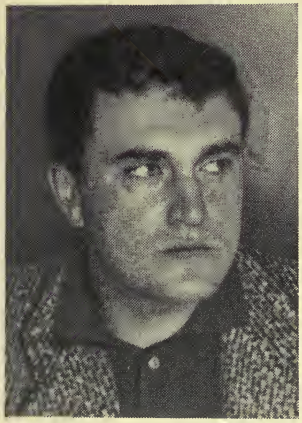
"When *Colleagues* was finished I felt drained, and somewhere deep down inside of me I was afraid. Finished. Emptied. The end. What next?

" 'Oh, well,' I comforted myself, 'I have a profession I'll work. Perhaps in another five years I'll write something else.'

"But the world is enormous and wherever one goes one finds themes for new books: in Metro entrances, where fashionable young men hang about smoking, in laboratories where scientists are carrying on complicated experiments, in the Arctic, which I dream of seeing some day.

"With age, despite the professional experience and skill it brings, I fear one's understanding of youth becomes blunted.

"And so before it is too late I want to capture the many fleeting expressions on the faces of my youthful contemporaries—those



who ride in trains and make their way on foot, those who are building towns in the taiga, those who are training for flights into space. Our young people are worth writing about—writing much and well."

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Василий Аксенов

# КОЛЛЕГИ

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
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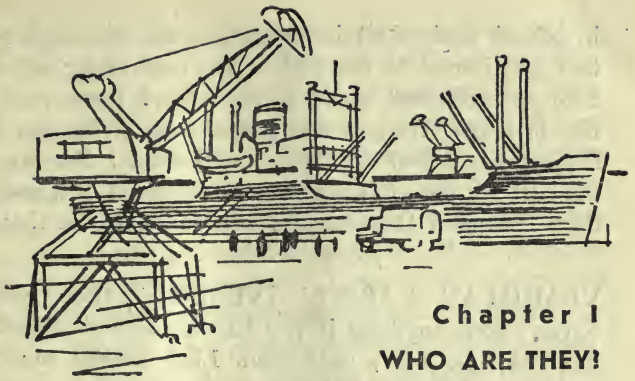

# Chapter I

## WHO ARE THEY!

This is how they would fill in a form:
Year of Birth: 1932
Country of Birth: Soviet Union
Party Affiliations: Member of the Komsomol since 1947
Criminal Record: None
Relatives Abroad: None
War Service: None
Decorations: None
(And a few more "nones" leading down to....)
Family Status: Single

And this is what they told me about themselves:

ALEXEI MAXIMOV (MAX): We were all babies once, so I am told. My mother is a teacher, my father is dead. Where have I lived? In lots of places; we were always moving. I was born in Novgorod. Made out pretty well in school. Favourite subject? H'm ... er... penmanship. Played soccer

in school, volley-ball in college. I still play volley-ball and intend to the end of my days. Why did I take up medicine? You'd like to know? I see, you'd like to know. Well, it was just chance. What am I saying! Medicine? Can't live without it! But why the hell are you quizzing me like the head of a god-dam Personnel Department? Me rude? I like that! Well, you can go—you know where.

VLADISLAV KARPOV (VLADKA): Boy, you haven't seen anything if you haven't seen the Black Sea! My pa was a fisherman. Like smoked mackerel? There's a song that goes:

*Kiss me, kiss me, oh kiss me,*
*When I'm gone, just think how you'll miss me.*
*If you're very fond of smoked mackerel*
*I'll send you a carload or two.*

Sport? Of course I go in for sport—can't you tell by looking at me? All sorts of sport. Like billiards best. You do too? Shall we have a game some time? Where do you hail from? Like to dance? You seem a good sort. Pay us a visit one of these days; you won't be sorry. The Black Sea—that's something! Terrific! Well, I'm off.

ALEXANDER ZELENIN (SASHA): Yes, I was born in Leningrad. Here, step into the dining-room. See these old daguerreotypes? They're my ancestors. This one was a Doctor of Philosophy at the Universi-

ty of St. Petersburg; this one was a famous explorer; this one was imprisoned in Schlüsselburg Fortress in connection with an attempt on the tsar's life. I'm a little proud of them, you know. The next generation turned to medicine—mother and father are both doctors. And now here am I—all but. Besides liking medicine, I consider it the most important profession of all. And one that broadens one's outlook. Every year I seem to understand people better psychologically as well as physiologically. Oh, yes, it's a grand profession. The only drawback is that I'll have to leave Leningrad. It's hard to think I shan't be able to stroll down the Bolshoi Prospekt or along the Neva embankment, stopping to gaze at the sunset reflected in the windows of the Hermitage. But it can't be helped. One has to do one's duty. What are you laughing at, Max? Don't mind him, he's always like that.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Alexei Maximov is inclined to be brusque and morose, and he is always putting on a show.

Vladka Karpov can best be described as "a good egg" or "one of the boys". Girls fall for him. He plays the guitar.

Sasha Zelenin is impulsive, rather comical, very polite, very candid, very likable.

The friendship between these three began in their first year of Medical School. One is often surprised

to find people who are very different forming fast friendships, but true friendship can only exist among people who are different. Similarity leads inevitably to conflict and estrangement. In this trio Zelenin's contemplative nature and intense sincerity were balanced by Maximov's affected sophistication and Karpov's flippancy.

So here they are. And at the time of writing—the spring of 1956—they are striding ahead in the teeth of the wind, their minds occupied by a single thought: tomorrow they are to be assigned to their first jobs.

## WHAT THEY THOUGHT ABOUT ASSIGNMENTS

"Where do you get all these lofty ideas?" said Max testily. "'The acid test!' Crap!"

"That's precisely what it is," retorted Sasha.

"The hell it is. Assignments are compulsory, and no civilised person wants to be forced to go to the wilds and turn into a savage."

"Rot! Geologists spend years in the taiga without turning into savages."

"Geologists! They have a swell time. Sent out in groups, all their own guys, lots of fun. And us? Do you think it's not having electricity and inside toilets that scares me? Nothing of the sort. But imagine yourself far away in some provincial hospital, steppe or forest all around, the wind howling and you alone

—all, all alone! The day's over, you have your dinner, hang around for a few hours, and go to bed. The years pass, you grow dull, fat, lazy, and begin to accept the gifts brought by grateful patients. Spring chickens and sucking-pigs come to be the only thing you care about, and if you happen to recall the discussions of your student days it's with a smile of condescension."

"Br-r-r!" said Vladka with a shudder. "Turn it off, Max. It's enough to freeze your blood."

"What? You afraid of life in the village, you fisherman's son?" asked Sasha.

"Damn right I am," laughed Vladka. "But what's to be done? Seems to be our sorry lot. Like it or not, we've got to 'pack up our meagre belongings', as the song goes."

"What would you *like* to do?" asked Max sharply.

"Me? Nothing much. Just go on dating the girls, seeing your crumby faces around me, tramping the sidewalks of this historic city, haunting the music halls, going to the circus, even putting on my own number at the circus: 'Vladislav Karpov, Music and Clowning.' As a side-line I wouldn't mind getting a job as assistant surgeon in Kruglov's hospital."

"And you, Max?" asked Sasha.

"I want excitement," said Max vehemently. "I want to enjoy myself while I'm young, wherever I am. But the prospects look drab enough. A country doctor. We may as well face facts as we've been

taught to do. Let Professor Tarkhanov and the rest rave about our high calling and patriotic duty, let Chivilikhin shout that we, the romantic youth, are not to be intimidated by hardships. Everybody knows that Chivilikhin has got himself a neat little job in the city hospital. Romance my eye! If somebody was to say to me, 'Climb into that rocket and we'll shoot you into space where your remains are sure to be scattered in the name of science,' I'd shout hooray. But when they try to tell me it's my high calling and patriotic duty to turn into an Ionich,* I want to puke. If I must I must, but without the treacle, please."

"What about the patients who need you and are waiting for you? Don't you ever think about them?" asked Sasha.

"Pa-a-tients?" drawled Max as if he had never heard the word before.

"Remember what Dr. Gushchin always said when he made his rounds?" said Vladka. " 'The patients, gentlemen, seem to be recovering despite our efforts.' "

"Don't you ever think of anybody but yourself, Max?" asked Sasha.

"I suppose you never think of yourself?" he retorted.

* Ionich is the smug unprincipled provincial doctor of Chekhov's story of the same name.—*Tr.*

"Well, you're going to have a hard time of it, I can tell you that."

"Don't worry about me, Sir Lancelot; I beg you not to worry about me."

"What about taking in a movie?" said Vladka.

## ASSIGNMENTS

It was an unforgettable day. A day of cutting classes, of laughing, crying and fainting. Dozens entered the office to get their assignments, hundreds waited anxiously to hear the results (parents, wives, sweethearts, friends, and curious undergraduates).

Max, Sasha, and Vladka were sitting on a sofa in a second-floor corridor. Max and Vladka were waiting their turn, Sasha was waiting for them. His turn would come on the following day. Behind the glass doors of the pathology laboratory figures in white caps and coats could be seen moving about calmly. For them this day held no terrors. For them it was simply the twenty-ninth of March. That is, for most of them.

"No kidding, what are you going to do, Vladka?" asked Max in a low anxious voice.

"I won't sign the papers," said Vladka glumly.

"Have you gone ... er...?" said Max, tapping his forehead. "You won't be given a diploma if you refuse."

"How can I ship out to some godforsaken place when she's staying here?"

"She?" Max gazed at his friend in astonishment. "For God's sake, do you mean to say you still—" He turned round, gave a little start, and whispered: "Speak of the devil. . . ."

A tall girl was coming down the corridor. She smiled, she radiated. There was defiance in her carriage and in the sharp click of her heels. Perhaps because she was trying to keep her poise under the battery of so many eyes. Just as she was about to open the door of the laboratory she caught sight of her friends. She paused.

"Don't notice her," murmured Max, who quickly buried himself in the morning paper.

She came slowly over to the sofa as if drawn on a leash.

"Hello, boys," she said in a friendly tone. A stranger would have detected no falseness in it.

"Same to you," murmured Vladka.

"*Bon jour*," growled Max.

"Hello, Vera," said Sasha.

She looked at the supercilious Vladka and the aloof Max with disdain tempered by affection (she seemed not to notice Sasha). What was it that drew her to them? The friendship that had once existed or that other feeling, old and secret, that nothing could cure? Nonsense. A hang-over from her teen age. She

glanced around. The students loitering in the corridor were staring inquisitively. Everyone remembered only too well how she had suddenly dropped Vladka Karpov and married Assistant Professor Vesehlin of the Pathology Department. It had caused a sensation. Vera smiled.

"Wouldn't you like to know my assignment?" she asked.

Max narrowed his eyes.

"As if we didn't know," he said mockingly. "The action developed along the following lines: In she came, light and fresh as a breath of ... of ... oh, well, some damn thing. 'This,' says the Dean, 'is Vera Vesehlin, one of our best students.' 'Vesehlin?' says the astonished Tarkhanov. 'Could she be the wife of our respected colleague?' 'The same,' says the Dean. 'Then everything is clear,' says Tarkhanov. 'Let her be towed up the stream of scientific research by her illustrious spouse.' "

Vera winced. This was just about what had happened. She did not know whether to walk off in a huff, dismiss it as a joke, or burst into tears. The situation was saved by the man who always saved her: her husband. He came out of the laboratory at this point and led her away.

Pyotr Stolbov, a big burly fellow, called out jocularly: "See that, Vladka? Abducted in broad daylight!"

Down the hall came Edik Ambartsumyan and Igor Pirogovsky arm in arm. Igor, who wrote poetry, was a favourite among the students.

"A nice trick they've played on us," said Igor, coming up to the three friends. "Edik and I had just decided to go north together—he to Orotukan, me to Oimyakon. He promised to treat me to bear meat. I hoped to bring back a trunkful of new verse. And just for spite they assign me to graduate school, to work in therapeutics. So much for poetry and bear meat! Man proposes, the committee disposes."

"Think I'll put in a bid for the North too," said Max. "It has its points—double pay, Chukchi igloos, aero-sledges. . . ."

"Aero-sledges and *spiritus vini*," put in Vladka. "Right you are, Max. Let's get the hell out of here."

Just then a middle-aged man in a worn overcoat and felt hat came up.

"Where would you like to be sent, boys?" he said.

"To Rio de Janeiro," said Vladka.

"Nothing so funny about that," said the man soberly. "It can very well be Rio de Janeiro. I'm chief of the Medical Administration of the Baltic Merchant Marine. We're looking for ship's surgeons. I think you'd like our terms: double pay, half in foreign currency, when you're at sea; room and board free. Of course you'll have to work in port a few months to learn the job before setting out."

"Setting out for where?" asked Max.

"All sorts of places—India, the Argentine, shorter trips to London, Antwerp, Havre. Well?"

"I'm willing," cried Vladka and Max simultaneously.

"You'll forget everything you've learned," protested Sasha. "You'll become disqualified."

"No, they won't," said the man in an injured tone. "Perhaps more knowledge and courage is demanded of a ship's surgeon than of any other. Anything can happen. Recently one of our doctors operated on a man with a rupture during a storm on the Atlantic. No joke, that! And you can carry on scientific research. Yes, you can, don't be surprised. What's wrong with this as a theme for a thesis: 'The Physiology of Labour on Board Ship in Fluctuating Climatic Conditions'? There's no end to possible themes. Throw yourself into the work with a will and you can count on all the support you need."

"Where shall we put up while we're on shore?" asked Pyotr Stolbov.

"At first in a dormitory, with permanent residence registration in Leningrad. Later on you'll be given apartments."

"Good! I'm willing."

The man took out a memo-book.

"Your names?"

"Maximov."

"Karpov."

"Stolbov."

"I need one more."

"Sign up, Sasha!" said Max, showing his friend a clenched fist.

The man went away. The boys sat silent. Sasha sat silent and smoked. Pyotr sat silent and calculated. Max and Vladka sat silent and gazed into space. All over. Where was the danger now of turning into an Ionich? Of growing fat and sleek in a distant village? Like a magician performing for children, the man in the worn overcoat had raised a curtain and revealed a vast expanse of shimmering water. And out of the water rose a mirage—palm-trees, sky-scrapers, cathedral spires, pyramids. You had dreamed of a life extraordinary, intense, filled with interest? And thought you would never get it? You were wrong, you see. Here, take your ticket and ride into a future as bright and fascinating as a film. India! The Argentine! Double pay! Scientific research! Storms at sea!

Syoma Fisher shook his head dubiously. What was life for him without a hospital, night duty, case histories to pore over? Igor Pirogovsky envied the three. Ambartsumyan could not make up his mind whether they were to be envied or not. Genka Bondar, man of the world, smiled ironically. Kostya Gorkushin was disgusted that they should fall for the lure of the exotic so easily. A frivolous lot! Vladka Karpov and

Alexei Maximov were *stilyagi**. Pyotr Stolbov was only interested in personal gain. Sasha Zelenin kept his mouth shut, the wise guy.

At last Vladka summed everything up by saying:

"Well, fellows, somebody's got to plough the seven seas!"

## A WINDY EVENING

Spring came in a rush that year. By the middle of March everything was thawing. The Street-Cleaning Trust was hard pressed for it. From morning to night the streets were scraped and swept by all sorts of mechanisms. The janitors resorted to the good old-fashioned method of shovelling the snow off the roofs, bombarding the streets below. A jolly bombardment! The evening sun crouched in ambush behind the buildings on Vasilyevsky Island, from where it aimed its rays at the line of trolley-buses and cars skimming along Bolshoi Prospekt. Soon the sky above the sunset took on a greenish tinge, bringing memories of summers spent in Young Pioneer camps and evoking dreams of travelling to foreign lands. Lyrical couples and noisy groups with guitars appeared in the parks. The first evenings of spring

* Russian equivalent to English Teddy-boy and American "beatnik".—*Tr.*

were animated by a strumming of strings, soft voices, laughter, the sound of kissing.

On the evening after assignments, Max and Sasha strolled down Kirovsky Prospekt to the Neva. Vladka had disappeared—no doubt he had run off to tell the glad tidings to his various girls.

Here she was, the Neva! Sunset had sprinkled gold dust over the Rostral Columns and the Naval Museum. Down the Palace Embankment, like raindrops in a drain-pipe, rolled glistening cars. A familiar mood took possession of the two boys. They loved to stroll in silence about Leningrad. Someone had said that friendship is the ability to be together and say nothing. They shrank from speaking as the beloved town revealed itself to them, and they felt themselves at one with those who had conceived and built it. They crossed the Neva and went along the embankment. Sasha whistled ruminatively. Max glanced at his lean face under the wide brim of his hat and felt annoyed. Why the devil must he whistle? Max couldn't bear his habit of suddenly breaking into some crazy tune, a far-away look in his eye and a smile on his lips. There was no guessing where his thoughts were wandering.

"Say what you will, it's the best version," said Max.

"What's that?" asked Sasha with a start.

"The best version when it comes to assignments. For you, too. I can see you hate the thought of leav-

ing Leningrad. Between voyages you could spend all your time here. Don't forget to let that man know tomorrow."

"Oh, yes," replied Sasha. "For sure, for certain."

So much for the "acid test", thought Max with relief.

"Shall we stand here a bit?" he said.

"Let's."

They leaned on the parapet and gazed at the river, whose waters were streaked with red. The Baltic wind brought the tang of the sea. In a few minutes Max began craning his neck at the girls who went past.

"Lots of pretty ones, damn it all!"

"Lots," exclaimed Sasha. "Makes you want to dance with all of them."

"That's easy. A bottle of '777' and you'll be dancing with the whole world. Carnival guaranteed. What say? Shall we have a drink?"

"Okay. What shall we drink to? The ocean? Wind-filled sails?"

"To boilers and engines," laughed Max.

"No, sails. Whenever I think of the sea I hear the overture to 'Captain Grant's Children'. A hymn to adventurous youth."

"There you go," frowned Max. "Come along."

They turned and discovered they were being watched by two men. One was tall and looked much the worse for wear; the other was short and stout

and had a crutch under his right arm. Both were tipsy.

"Wait, Misha," said the cripple; then, turning to the boys: "Allow me, gentlemen, to infringe upon your privacy."

"What do you want?" asked Sasha.

The cripple glanced at him uncertainly and a blissful smile slid over his face.

"Mind answering a few questions? You're educated boys, judging by the looks of you . . . and in general. Students? I was a student myself once. Had no chance to finish. The war. Yegorov's my name. Sergei Yegorov." Pressing the crutch to his side with his elbow, he held out his hand to Max and said in a loud voice: "What do you live for, you young guys? What does your gauge register? Or rather, how's your course charted? We knew where we were going at your age and why. We stood to the death."

"And now you devote your lives to—this?" and Max held an imaginary bottle to his lips.

The cripple threw back his head and his eyes cleared for a moment.

"We veterans still know what it's all about, but you, you young fellows—all you know is how to stroll along the boulevard."

"You mean us?"

"You and the likes of you."

"Run along, bud. Take yourself off. We don't know you," said Max, feeling his anger rising. He put his

hand on the cripple's shoulder and turned him around gently but firmly.

"Hands off," cried the tall man threateningly. His bony face was twisted into a grimace. Putting an arm around his friend, he said into his ear: "Keep away from 'em, Sergei; they're muck. Darin' to insult a war hero! Look a' this, folks," he said, addressing the passers-by. "These swells are insulting a war hero!"

"We're not swells!" exclaimed Sasha. "And we didn't insult him."

"A wounded war veteran that shed his blood for 'em, that gave his right leg for 'em. I saw it happen myself ... back in '41 near Rostov. 'Member, Sergei?—good ol' pal!—'member that slit trench? You were lyin' there with a PTR, I was lyin' with a tommy-gun ten feet away. That's when it happened —bang! An' then the tanks came."

"Don't remember the tanks," said Yegorov.

A little crowd had gathered and stood listening. Max winked at Sasha and gave a forced laugh.

"Herols' reminiscences, but I'll bet he had his leg cut off by a trolley—fell on the rails when he was soaked."

He broke off abruptly. The tall man was staring at him without a word. His cheeks were cleft by two deep lines and Max was struck by the utter contempt in his eyes. Scorching, unforgettable contempt. Max

leaned forward. Suddenly he felt his arm taken from behind. He turned. A colonel of aviation.

"Don't make fun of them, boys. It's no crime for war heroes to remember days that are gone. And you, bud," turning to the tall man, "have no right calling people names when you don't know anything about them."

"We're not swells, we're ... we're doctors." Sasha tried to say it with dignity, but his voice trembled.

"Stop explaining," said Max roughly. "Come along."

They walked along the embankment till darkness set in. When they reached Lieutenant Schmidt Bridge they turned back. A strong wind was rippling the reflections on the surface of the water. Each spot of light danced in its own way and those at the water's edge leaped up as if afraid of being caught in the shadow of the Peter and Paul Fortress. Max and Sasha turned up their coat collars.

"It's all my fault," said Max. "I had no business teasing the cripple. Drunks are touchy."

"Why drunks? Maybe they were just celebrating."

"Normal people don't go in for soul-searching talks with perfect strangers."

"Remember what Walt Whitman said? Something like: if you see a man in a crowd you would like to single out and talk to, single him out and talk to him. Maybe that Yegorov is really haunted by the

question he put to us. Funny, but I got a clear picture of them lying in that slit trench near Rostov. They were just our age at the time, they didn't want to die, they didn't want to lose their arms and legs, but they lay there and shot and never thought of turning and running. I don't think it was because they were so brave or disciplined. I think it was because they felt indebted to all the Russians who had gone before them, and responsible to all who were to come after. And now Yegorov wants to know if this generation that just 'strolls along the boulevard' is capable of sacrifice."

" 'Sacrifice'? Rubbish! An idiotic word! What are we, pagans?"

"Not sacrifice, perhaps, but duty. Do you accept that?"

"Obligation?"

"No, duty. Patriotic duty. A feeling for your buddies in the slit trench."

Max's cigarette went out. He had difficulty relighting it in the wind. As he struck match after match he muttered through his teeth:

"God, how I hate that cant, those high-sounding phrases. It's not only a lot of idealists like you who use them, it's a lot of bastards too. Beria probably talked like that to fool the Party. But it's too late for that stuff now, we've had our eyes opened and it won't go. I love my country and all it stands for, and I'd gladly give my arms, legs, life for it, but I

don't answer to anybody but myself, my own conscience. I don't need any cheering on. It just confuses the issue, get me?"

Sasha brought his fist down hard on the granite and seemed not to feel it..

"No I don't," he said. "It's not only our consciences we answer to, it's the people as well, all the people—those who died on Senate Square, those who died on the Field of Mars, our contemporaries—but most of all those who will come after us. As for high-sounding phrases, once our eyes have been opened we ought to be glad of it and not go around grouching like you all the time. Now that we see how things stand we won't let anybody speculate in things that to us are sacred."

Max stood pulling on his cigarette for a moment before he said:

"You're a deep one, Lancelot."

Two young men are standing with turned-up coat collars, their faces to the wind. They are still very young. Sometimes they feel as carefree as little boys, but at others—now, for instance, when spring rivulets are rushing noisily down the slopes—they know they have come of age. They look behind them, they look around them, they look ahead of them. They look ahead, seeking a path.

## Chapter II
## THEIR LAST SUMMER VACATION

"Show the bums!"

"Watch that long-legged fellow's drive! Hell, missed it!"

"Smash it! Smash it!"

The shouts of the fans did no good. The team of "Bums" (Alexei Maximov, Alexander Zelenin, and others) ignominiously defeated the team from the Shoemakers Rest Home. Max passed the ball to Sasha. Sasha leaped into the air and brought it down just on the other side of the net. That finished the game. Naturally Sasha lost his specs. He lost them every time he jumped for the ball, but this time he felt that the blurred faces and careening tree-tops were applauding him for his smash-hit. Max patted him on the shoulder.

"Good boy, Sasha."

"Where is she? Where? Where?" cried Sasha.

"The blonde?"

"Yes. Where is she?"

"Pick up your bifocals and you'll see her."

A slender girl in grey jeans was standing under a pine-tree. On catching Sasha's wandering eye she laughed and walked off, wheeling a boy's bicycle beside her.

" 'All unexpected, among the din of the contest. . . .' "

"You're right," said Sasha excitedly. "You've guessed it. I've found Her."

"You don't look the part. You ought to be wearing a tux at least. Instead you're just all smeared up," grinned Max. "Come on, let's go for a swim."

The beach was empty. Even the most indefatigable bathers had gone home. The friends walked out to the end of the pier and stood there, held spellbound by the sunset. The sun hung over the glistening horizon like the dome of a fairy-tale castle, and straight across the sea, like the stripe left by a lash, stretched a quivering red pathway.

"A wicked sight, the sunset," said Max.

"A lovely sight," said Sasha.

"Wicked. Just a fake, that's the trouble. It's as if there was some wonderful land beyond the horizon where everybody spoke beautiful words and life was thrilling and happy. And you know all the time there is no such thing."

"Shall we swim out and see?"

They dived in together and swam along the sunlit path. The water splashed up by their arms was red as wine. Max turned round and raised his eyes to the sweep of pine forest ending in a rim of yellow sand that was the Karelian Isthmus. Thousands of people along the coast were having supper at this hour.

"Oh bliss! Oh joy of life!" sang Max. Sasha, his mouth open, his eyes popping, rose to the surface beside him.

"Rubies!" he cried, slapping the water with the palm of his hand. They swam back to the pier and perched on the iron ladder.

"In two days we go to work, and Vladka hasn't come back yet," said Max. Sasha heaved a sigh.

"The day after tomorrow I set out for the backwoods. Our last holiday. Farewell, farewell. Very sad."

"Don't go."

"You mean. . .?"

"Just don't go. Have your papa dress up in his Sunday best, go to the Public Health Department, phone here, pay a visit there, and the deed is done. His son gets a job in Leningrad. For a week the lofty-principled family suffers pangs of conscience, then life goes on. Why not?"

"You're talking through your hat."

"You want to go to that backwoods?"

"No," snapped Sasha.

"Naturally. You're a city boy to the bone. A pedigreed intellectual. It's all the same to a guy like Kostya Gorkushin where he goes."

"No, it isn't. He dreamed of going back to his Volga, but he's going way up north to Yakutia instead."

"Because he gets double pay and a bonus for going way up north."

"That's not the reason," said Sasha obstinately.

Max stared at his friend. He looked particularly

thin, pale, and inspired sitting on the iron step up to his waist in water.

"Come back to earth, sonny-boy. There's such a thing as pay on this earth—double pay and single pay, and city registration as well. At least you keep your Leningrad registration if you go to Yakutia. You say all the openings for ship's surgeons have been filled, but you could still go to Yakutia."

"So as to hang on to my registration in Leningrad? Why should I? It's humiliating."

"Okay. But that's not the only thing I have in mind. You're going to a hole, a stinking hole, even if it is only a day's ride from Leningrad. Yakutia is at least exotic."

"I'll tell you why I'm going there. It's because I heard somebody say they hadn't had a doctor in that place for two years."

"Noble fellow! Your name will be written in gold letters in the annals of—"

"One day's ride from Leningrad and no doctor. A disgrace. It's my duty to go."

Why he should have started such a discussion on their last evening together Max could not have said, but some perverseness goaded him on.

"To hell with you," he said. "Makes me sick to listen to you. Such piety!"

"Don't be scathing, Max. Remember the talk we had about high-sounding phrases? I've thought a lot about it since."

"So have I, and come to the conclusion that it's all a big bluff. There's a world made out of a lot of highly-polished verbal cobble-stones, and there's the real world where nice clean boys make rows in the streets and romantic young ladies climb into bed with prosperous gentlemen. And all the cheats, the go-getters? They just laugh at you behind your back while they make their fortunes. My motto is —be honest yourself, but don't let the cheats take advantage of you. Don't fall a prey to all this idealistic crap."

"There was a time, Max, when you dreamt of living a better life, of carrying on the struggle."

"I still dream of carrying on the struggle—the struggle to get to the top."

"Without any thought for others?"

"Still harping on the old theme? Ancestors and future generations?"

"That's right."

"What can I, Alexei Maximov, do in their behalf?"

"Continue the work of our ancestors for the sake of future generations. All of us are links in a single chain."

"You expect me to sacrifice myself for them? How do I know what will happen when I die? Perhaps nothing at all. Perhaps the world is just a dream of mine."

"Of all the dam fool ideas!" said Sasha in exasperation. "Behold the new prophet of solipsism!"

At that moment there was a splash as if a meteorite had dropped into the sea three feet away. The water rose in a column and when it settled they caught sight of a body writhing in the depths.

"He ought to have his face punched for a trick like that," said Max.

Up came a red cap, a face, a bronzed body.

"Vladka!" they exclaimed in one voice.

Vladka swam to the pier and climbed up. He was a dark and handsome southerner. His muscles flicked like little fishes under his glossy skin, and the smile he flashed at them might have come off an advertisement.

"Nice wholesome hunk of man," observed Max.

"My colleagues haven't changed, I see," said Vladka, breathing hard.

"Have a good time?"

"Super. What about you?"

"Not bad."

"Sasha looks pale."

"Always does—have you forgotten? A restless soul with lofty impulses. And didn't he have to go and get shot by Cupid's arrows on the eve of setting out to perform feats of self-sacrifice!"

"Speaking of love, I met the cutest little actress in Odessa."

Max gasped and gave a hopeless shrug of his

shoulders. The same old story. Max was sick to death of hearing about Vladka's affairs. This time he was spared: Vladka turned to Sasha and asked for his story. Sasha muttered something under his breath in reply as he rummaged among his clothes for his glasses. Max struck a pose.

"Her coming was like a breath of . . . of. . . . H'm! I'm always getting into trouble with those breaths," he said.

"Like the breath of spring," put in Sasha.

"Very fresh and original simile. She rode up on a boy's bike to watch our battle with the Shoemakers. Then she rode off. Cheer up, Loncelot, we'll see her this evening at the dance."

"*Her* at a dance? Blasphemer!"

"Want to bet?"

"Go ahead. I'm witness," said Vladka.

When twilight fell they were walking briskly down the highway, in step as usual. Loud-speakers poured a nasal voice and the strumming of a guitar into the air. The song *Misha, Where's Your Smile?* had spread like an epidemic over the coast resorts that summer.

"Good god!" howled Max. "I'm going mad! Let me at that song-writer! Let me at him!"

"Keep in step," ordered Vladka. "No noise in the ranks!"

All's well, thought Max. We're horsing. We're going to a dance. We're nineteen years old. Oh,

no we're not—we're all of twenty-four. And this is our last outing together.

The lights of houses glimmered among the trees on either side of the road. The three strode ahead, leaving dull care behind them. There was something resolute in their movements. Why? No particular reason. Except that they were going to a dance. And that they were in high spirits. And that they were twenty-four years old.

Four flood-lights were turned on the open-air dance floor, giving it the appearance of a boxing ring. The boys paused for a second inside the entrance. Suddenly the hum of a motor was heard close by. A Pobeda drew up and Genka Bondar and the blonde whose coming had been like the breath of spring climbed out of it. They made for the dance floor.

"Damned if it ain't the fair lady!" gasped Max.

Genka overheard and laughed, flipping a hand at them.

"Hi, musketeers! Greetings, Sasha!" he cried.

"One more lost illusion," said Max to Sasha.

"You're right," murmured Sasha. "Ah, well—"

"Cut in as soon as they begin a waltz," said Vladka. "Genka can't waltz."

"Not me," said Sasha, and, turning, he left the floor and sat down on a bench in the shadow of the woods. He gazed up at the stars as he lit a ciga-

rette. So she came with Genka, he thought. The lady of my dreams. Naturally. Genka has a car. Vladka's handsome. Max isn't bad either. But me? The knight of the rueful countenance. But she certainly gave me the once-over during the volley-ball game. Don't flatter yourself, guy. You're ugly as hell. A freak.

When he came back he found just what he had expected. Vladka was waltzing with the girl and Max was leaning over the railing teasing the dejected Genka.

"Life's still ahead of you, sonny. Just square those shoulders and remember you've got a Mercedes waiting at the door."

The music stopped. Vladka and the girl made their way towards them through the crowd. She was wearing a pale dress tight at the waist and with a bell-shaped skirt. He had never seen such a dress before.

"Meet my friends, Inna."

There was a guy for you! He already knew her name and was on easy terms with her. Too easy. After all, he was in love with Vera Vesehlin.

"Alexei Maximov."

"Alexander Zelenin."

"My name happens to be Bondar, Genka Bondar."

"What? Aren't you acquainted? Didn't you play in the sand pile together when you were kiddies?"

"He just gave me a lift," laughed Inna.

"Well, well!" said Max. "Genka seems to be reforming. Trust is what does it."

"Why, did I run a risk?" asked Inna with a smile.

The loud-speaker buzzed, coughed, crackled, and fragments of the tango "La Compassita" came over.

"Shall we have this one?" asked Genka with a feeble attempt to be nonchalant.

Vladka smiled meaningly, Max clicked his heels.

"Oh, no, excuse me," said Sasha and took the girl resolutely by the arm. She raised her eyes in astonishment and walked with him out into the middle of the floor.

What's happened to me? thought Sasha. What's come over me?

Eyes as blue as twilight gazed at him inquiringly and approvingly—gazed at him in just the right way. He began to talk and went on talking without interruption, as if afraid the girl would be frightened away by silence. They whirled and glided and gazed at each other, and sometimes the tips of the pines thrusting up into the starry sky swam into their field of vision, and sometimes a mysterious breeze from the bay mingled with the perfumed air of the dance floor, and sometimes they were aware of the special significance of the moment. They danced one dance after another, then left the floor and disappeared.

"Lancelot seems to be making out pretty well. Not bad, eh?" said Max approvingly.

He and Vladka were sitting on the railing of the dance pavilion. Max was amusing himself by conjuring up pictures of Sasha at this crucial moment of his life.

"Is Pirogovsky still in Komarovo?" asked Vladka.

"Yes. We've been to see him a couple of times."

"Well?" asked Vladka eagerly.

"Well what? We played ping-pong."

Poor Vladka. Neither his trip to the south nor his affair with the cute little actress could make him forget Vera. The pitiable manoeuvring he was doing! He longed to ask about her and was afraid to.

"Vera was there—with her husband, of course. I didn't talk to her. Didn't want to."

"Why should you say that?" asked Vladka coldly.

Why should he indeed? What business was it of his that Vera had gone out of Vladka's life? He, Max, certainly felt nothing for her. There were prettier girls, and more sincere ones. Why should he let it bother him?

"What do you think?" asked Vladka miserably. "Could she have married him just to make sure of a Leningrad assignment?"

"Oh, hardly."

"You don't really think she loves him?"

"Who knows? Perhaps she was enamoured of the idea of working together in science. Marie Sklodowska and Pierre Curie. Vera is capable of that.

And viewed from such an angle, you wouldn't attract her."

"You're sure of that?" snapped Vladka.

"Vera is. Or at least I think she is."

"Ain't you the good pal!"

Towards one o'clock in the morning they were lying in bed smoking when the stairs under the window creaked stealthily, and presently, against the background of the clear night sky, rose the silhouette of Sasha. His glasses were bright with moonlight.

"Enter Don Juan," grunted Max.

"What a girl! Oh, what a girl!" said Sasha from his perch on the window-sill.

"Go to bed, Lancelot!"

"Did you kiss her?" asked Vladka, trying to hide his envy.

"Are you crazy? On the first date? We talked. A lot and about everything. But she's from Moscow, goes to Moscow University, and I'm leaving for Kruglogorye."

## FAREWELLS

Sasha's parents were standing beside their son. Politely reserved, even a bit stiff, they looked out of place among the animated crowd on the river pier.

"Remember, son..." said Sasha's father.

"I will."

"Let me know immediately how you get fixed up. Living conditions are exceedingly important," said his mother, growing pompous in her effort to conceal her emotion.

Sasha's friends were standing off to one side. They were grave and silent.

Presently Inna put in an appearance. Unconsciously Sasha watched her straight slim figure in a blue sweater weave through the crowd. Suddenly her face lit up and she made a dash for him, but stopped short on catching sight of his parents. Vladka and Max came to her aid.

"Sasha will join us in a minute," said Vladka. "Soon as he's been given final instructions."

"And a flask of balsam," put in Max.

"And the necessary supply of shekels," added Inna.

They laughed mirthlessly. Inna was aware that they had accepted her as "their sort". She was glad, because she liked them; they laughed at the same things she did and were depressed by the same things. At the moment, however, she was happy while they were sad. This send-off was just the beginning of her relations with the comical Sasha.

"So it's me who's the first to set sail," said Sasha as he came up to them.

"We'll join you for some skiing," said Vladka. "They say there's fine skiing in those parts."

"Oh, let's!" said Inna joyously. "Let's spend our winter vacation together."

"No more winter vacations for us," said Max. "When you're on holiday, we'll be braving stormy seas and writing theses."

"I'll call you up in Moscow, Inna," said Sasha.

From somewhere down in the bowels of the boat came the first warning hoot. The pier rocked slightly and the people standing on it felt that they, too, were setting out.

"See that you have a balanced diet, Sasha," called out his mother. "Do watch your diet, son."

At this point she broke down and Father touched her shoulder in embarrassment.

"Remember the words: 'Sons were made to go away; mothers were made to wait and pray.' "

Inna stood with her eyes fixed on Sasha; the boys sang their Medical School song and Sasha, from where he was standing in the bow of the boat, joined in.

He thought as he sang: She *did* come to see me off although she hadn't promised to. So long, fellows. You're good guys, all right. Yes, Mother, I'll keep to a balanced diet. Yes, Father, I'll....

The steamer, like an enormous block of white marble, stood in the middle of the river for a little while, then moved quickly eastward, into the twilight.

Somebody behind Inna coughed self-consciously.

"I beg your pardon," said Sasha's father, "but we should like to make your acquaintance."

Other farewells were said that same evening. The group going to Yakutia was seen off from the Moscow Station. Clara, Kostya Gorkushin, Ambartsumyan, Syoma Fisher and others, all in waterproof sports jackets and heavy-soled boots that made them look more like hikers than doctors stood on the platform beside their car. They, too, sang the Medical School song, their minds on the long road ahead of them and the new experience awaiting them at the end. "Have you got us all in focus?" "Am I in?" they cried to the friends seeing them off.

"Funny that you and I should be seeing everybody off when we are the ones who will do the real travelling," said Max to Vladka.

Oily blobs of light slithered over the water of the Fontanka. The noise of Nevsky Prospekt reached it now in a solid roar, now in odd syncopated snatches. Vladka spat into the Fontanka.

"Poor old Sasha!" he murmured.

"Humph!" said Max. "You'd think we were burying him. What's so tragic about going off to the assigned job? He'll soon come back. And be all the wiser for it."

"And us?"

"What about us? We're going to the assigned job too. Only we've been luckier."

"Are you sure we haven't shown the white feather?"

"Oh, come off it, Vlad."

"It's this way," went on Vladka seriously, "everything's okay, the logic's sound and my conscience is clear, but sometimes I feel as if I'd slipped into the movies on a used ticket. It's sort of ... er ... too good to be true."

"Look at those girls," said Max.

"Where?" chirped Vladka. "Oho! That's the stuff! Hello, girls. Where you going? We are too. Come along, Max."

## DOWN TO BUSINESS

The first day of work. The first day of a professional career. The first day of earning one's living. An ordinary August day. No blowing on bugles. Not even the rustle of a breeze in the trees. The day began with an interview with the chief.

Max, Vladka and Pyotr Stolbov were sitting on a sofa listening to what he had to say. They were a little subdued by the leathery luxury of the office. And by the chief himself, who, from behind an enormous desk, made a different impression on them than he had during assignments. He was stern and dry.

"There will be plenty of difficulties," he said. "I'm

telling you this so that you don't set your hearts on an easy life, then get disillusioned and run away. We need steady, permanent members of our staff, no week-end guests."

He tore a leaf out of his memo-book and jotted something down on it.

"For the present I'm placing you at the disposal of the Hygiene and Quarantine Department. There you'll learn something about ship hygiene and sanitation. What's that? You'd like to practise surgery? Sorry, Dr. Karpov, but we can't have you doing two jobs at once. Don't worry, you won't forget anything. You can work in our hospital from time to time to keep in trim. But it's prophylactic measures that are of primary importance in naval medicine. Remember that once and for all. Now go to the Personnel Department and make out your papers. See that you fill in the form plainly: mama, papa, and all the rest. Don't have to mention your granny. You will live here in the port for the present, at Quarantine Headquarters. And so—to work, boys!"

Forms, autobiographies, recommendations, a visit to the book-keeping department, telephone calls, introductions, hand-shaking—and the first day came to a close. Max, Vladka, and Pyotr strolled down to the docks. The evening was hot. It is always hot in the middle of August.

When they reached the main gate the watchman gave them directions.

"Straight ahead, youngsters, till you come to the cold storage warehouse. Then turn to the left till you come to Lesnaya Harbour. When you find yourselves on Cape Chastaya Pila, follow the shore till you see a yellow building. That's Quarantine Headquarters. Far? Oh, about five kilometres or so!"

"Won't *that* be fun!" groaned Pyotr. "Well, come along."

"That's right, that's right," chuckled the old man. "Shake down your innards and make room for an appetite. Not that you'll find much to eat there."

"Ain't you the cheerful little Cerberus!" said Max, patting the old man on the shoulder. "*Au revoir*, grandad."

"Good-bye," he replied in unexpected English.

Max and Vladka exchanged glances. This foreign word spoken by the bearded watchman was, as it were, a proclamation that they were entering upon territory where the fantastic tongues of distant lands were spoken, that they were setting foot upon the last outpost of dry land, that they were about to walk past docks where the flags of all nations were flying and where magic phrases met in children's books, such as "Bring 'er aft!" "Heave to starboard!"

"Five bells!" "Caramba!" "Donnerwetter!", were spoken in all seriousness.

The men they passed were wearing pea-jackets, overalls, tunics, flannel trousers. Perhaps they would come upon someone in a bandana, hip boots, and with a pistol thrust into his belt? Apparently not, only the usual sort of workmen passed in the shadow of the warehouses. And then all of a sudden they caught sight of the masts of a sailing vessel protruding above the roofs. The docks, it turned out, were on the other side of the warehouses. Further on, the sky seemed to be held up by ships' masts and the arms of towering cranes. They were penetrating deeper and deeper into the bustling life of the wharves. Watch out! No traffic lights here! A freight train went crashing by only a few feet away. "Hey! Out of the way, you—!" Miniature electric cars veered sharply around corners, men in uniform darted here and there, long-shoremen swooped down upon them as menacingly (if less swiftly) as the trains. From behind the cold storage vault loomed a towering white form.

"What's the name of that steamer?" Max asked a passing long-shoreman.

"Steamer?" he scoffed. "No steam on her, buddy. A diesel ship—the *Baltika*. Leningrad-London."

The *Baltika* moved slowly past them, her glass glittering, her conical stack emitting a thin stream of smoke, her loud-speakers murmuring something

incoherent at this distance. Foreigners in sun-glasses were standing on her decks waving. Straight from London! London of the fogs!

Cape Chastaya Pila was like a saw with teeth on both sides formed by strips of land jutting out between the artificial inlets cut at regular intervals as fire-fighting reservoirs. There was lots of space and fresh air here and pleasant smells were borne on the wind—the smell of fresh pine boards, of seaweed at the edge of the sand. All around stretched the rippling blue surface of Maly Barzhevoi Harbour. Seagulls were screaming shrilly as they circled above the rafts.

At the end of the cape the boys came to a three-storeyed yellow building surmounted by a tower. From time to time it was used as a hotel for repatriated Russians and ships' crews in quarantine. But its permanent residents were the pigeons in the loft and the draughts and mysterious noises inhabiting all three floors. The Quarantine Service occupied four rooms in the tower. At night the building stood lonely and abandoned. Harbour lights moved stealthily across its dark windows and some loose tin roofing clattered horribly under the buffetings of the wind.

Max and Vladka took up their quarters in a corner room of the tower. One enormous window faced the west, the other two—the south. Almost no wall space interrupted the expanse of glass. One could

lie in bed and watch the work of the cranes on the western dam and breakwater, and the passing of ships in and out of the harbour. Pyotr remarked contemptuously that it was more like a bottle than a room. And a bottle without a cork.

"Feel that wind? You won't find it so funny when your bones begin to rattle."

"We'll sacrifice ourselves to the irresistible lure of the sea," said Vladka.

"Think of the ozone we're imbibing," added Max.

Pyotr swore under his breath and set out to find a warmer room.

Pyotr Stolbov had had few friends in Medical School. He was calculating, lent money, collected it on the exact day it was due, took careful notes of all lectures, never failed an exam, snored raucously, occasionally got drunk and made rude passes at girls.

"What the hell do you want with a higher nervous system?" Max had once asked him. "All you need is sharp claws, a thick coat of fur, and a jungle to swing through. Why go to the trouble of getting a college education?"

To which Pyotr had mumbled an obscenity in reply.

On the first day in their new room Max went to the store-room to get a kettle. The girl in charge was sitting at a table and Vladka was draped over

her chair in an operatic pose. He nodded carelessly to Max.

"Collect the stuff," he said.

And so the "bottle" began to look lived-in. Two polished writing-tables and a Neva wireless set were acquired. Vladka's handsome blanket and a table lamp made the room look cozy. A bad copy of Shishkin's famous picture "Bears in the Forest" (inevitable adornment of hotel rooms) added a consoling touch of impermanence. Mottoes of the day were hung up: "More Bach, less jazz" and "Get to work on your metabolism."

Lights invaded the room after dark. Moonbeams, spotlights, mast-lights, signal lights, the flash of electric welders wove and interwove, forming the mysterious patterns of the port at night. The smell of the port wedged its way into the room through cracks and crevices. Background music was supplied by throbbing engines, hooting horns, lapping waves. Max was fond of lying on his back and gazing up at the stars. It no longer made him feel afraid, feel giddy and obliterated, as it had when he was a child. Then star-gazing had made him go cold with fear that in another second he would be transformed into a mote of dust, dissolve in the overwhelming spaces inhabited by the stars and cease to exist. He had always pulled himself out of the hypnosis by shaking his head and concentrating his attention on some simple task such as solving an arithmet-

ic problem or recalling the face of the red-head who lived next door. Vaguely he had understood that in this lay man's high courage. And now? Now he was not afraid. Trials undoubtedly awaited him but he smiled as he gazed at the stars in the night sky and imagined that his bed, rocking gently, was flying through warm spaces teeming with life.

Morning. The braying of the steam barges carrying away the muck excavated by dredgers. The crash and scrape of excavators. No more sleeping for them. Max and Vladka leapt out of bed. They began work on their metabolism. The floor heaved as they jumped. Dumb-bells whirled through the air. At last, fresh and clean-shaven, they emerged from the "bottle". Vladka rushed out on to a balcony and raised his field-glasses.

"What ships are coming in today, Tamara?" he called out to the telephone operator.

"The German *Haparanda*, the Polish *Gliwice*, the English ... it has an unpronounceable name, and two of our own ships: the *Byelostok* and the *Kotelshchik* with the *Dvina* in tow," answered Tamara in a matter-of-fact tone, little realising what music it was to the ears of the two boys. Everything delighted Vladka—the scenery, the sea-gulls cleaving the air, the air itself smelling of seaweed, coal, pine-trees, and iron. He had been brought up in a fishing village on the shores of the sea. Once more he was experiencing a forgotten sensation of unaccountable

happiness. Max, too, was enjoying it. Their launch plunged into the dazzling sun-path as if asking to be smelted down, then darted to and from towering leviathans come from foreign shores. Soon we will be sailing on them, they thought to themselves.

The job: inspecting food stores, ships' galleys and sanitation logs, and drawing up documents. A boring business. Then back to the launch.

Women came running down to one of the piers. They ran without speaking and at the same pace, like a squadron of soldiers for drill. They were running to meet a ship that had been away for six months and was now drawing up at the pier. The women stood waiting—fat housewives and slender young women of fashion—women of various types, but with a common lot—that of being seamen's wives. Their husbands stood silent at the ship's railing, smiling oddly. It was as if they could not believe in the reality of the women there below, not more than twenty yards away—women who had given birth to their children, who had bestowed on them their love. But presently the spell was broken, the fleeting moment of silence in which they tried to analyse their emotions was supplanted by turmoil—shouts, cries, laughter, a rush down the gang-plank, kissing and embracing.

Five days the ship stood in dock to be unloaded and take on new cargo. On the evening of the fifth it set out again, this time for India. As he watched

its enormous shadow merging with the shadows of twilight, Max thought he could see the faces of the women on the pier with handkerchiefs pressed to their eyes—eyes that still bore the traces of a short-lived happiness.

"That's the best way to keep couples from getting sick of each other," Max remarked to Vladka. "That's my idea of marriage—your feelings kept sharpened by being away from your wife six months at a stretch, carrying her image about with you as the lovely lady of your desire."

"That's not how I see it," said Vladka softly. That's the only thing that could keep me from going to sea. If I ... if she had ... do you think I'd be here now?"

Max stared at him for a moment in silence. Once again he realised that Vera symbolised for Vladka the sentimental concept of "true love". Incredible! Gay, breezy, handsome, sporting Vladka! He always seemed to be laughing from the sheer joy of being alive. As a matter of fact, he always was. In the old days, perhaps, young men languished from unrequited love, but Vladka went on cultivating his muscles, wearing flashy ties, kissing the girls. Few people took him seriously; few knew of his two great passions: Vera and surgery. For years he had dreamed of working in some world-famous clinic. And this is what his dreams had come to! Everything lost in one throw.

Max tossed his head. He could not bear to think of it. Vladka meant too much to him. Forget it. What's done is done. Dreams of surgery are now to be replaced by dreams of foreign travel. As for Vera—time would cure him of that. Time heals all wounds—get that, Max?

They were standing at the window in the corridor of Quarantine Headquarters. There was something eerie about having this vast empty building at your back. Suddenly steps were heard on the stairs and down the corridor came a man of middle height wearing a dark-blue mackintosh and naval cap and carrying a bag.

"Hi, mates!" he said. "Can you show me to an empty cabin?"

"The whole ship's at your disposal," replied Vladka.

The man came closer.

"Name's Kapelkin—Veniamin Kapelkin, the Flying Dutchman," he grinned, holding out a hand.

The fumes of vodka were unmistakable. The newcomer was plump of body, round of face. His smile was arch but there was something winning about him. He followed the two boys into their room, took a bottle of French cognac out of his bag and poured it into two glasses and a shaving-cup.

"Here's to our health, which is what our mamas would wish us," he said. He swallowed the exquisite drink (meant to be sipped and lingered over) in

one gulp, Russian fashion, and in lieu of a snack took a sniff of his coat sleeve. Then he waxed eloquent. Max and Vladka drank in his every word. Kapelkin was eager to share the wisdom he had culled from much experience of the world. He expounded on women, ships, drinks, carpets, woollen cloth, Hamburg, London, Bombay, and roundly cursed the first mate of the ship he had just left.

"What a dull guy!—got about as much pep in him as an old pair of pants. As if the likes of him could understand my soul's thirsting."

Max and Vladka liked him. He made a good neighbour, this talkative sailor-doctor who had been fired by the last captain because his "thirsting" exceeded all bounds.

August was drawing to a close, yet the sun still poured warm rays on the Gulf of Finland. It was only the sharp breeze that sprang up in the evening that heralded the approach of autumn's chilling legions. Max wrote to Sasha:

"Sometimes I wake up with the feeling that there's a big concentration of energy not far away. I raise myself on my elbow and see a huge ship loaded to capacity moving slowly past our windows. Two or three lights are burning, a human figure stands on deck. The bow of the ship turns away. Somebody lights a match, somebody else throws a cigarette into the water. Farewell, dry land, till we meet again!

"I still think you're a dope, Sasha. Why don't you inform us of your feats of chivalry performed in the rural scene? Too busy sowing the Good, the True, and the Beautiful? Good old Sasha! Go right on sowing them—with proper crop rotation.

"Come on, write, you bum. We miss you."

## Chapter III
## HENRY IV

The little car belonging to the local Board of Health came out on the highway, winked its red lights once or twice as if in farewell, spurted ahead and rounded a bend in the road. It must have been dark in the woods for the driver turned on his headlights. A flying cloud of brightness could be seen through the pines. Soon even this vanished. Sasha stood gazing down the road a while. It glistened whitely in the twilight, giving the appearance of being smooth and reliable. But Sasha, who had just tested its quality, thought with sinking heart that this ribbon of ruts and holes was the only thing connecting Kruglogorye with the outer world—the railroad station, the district centre, and Leningrad. A fine highway: snowed under in winter, washed out in spring. Only in summer could it be bounced over at the risk of injuring one's vitals.

Electric lights indicated life on the lake in the darkness. They winked faintly on the barges, burned

in steady beams on the tow-boats, and signalled from the trawlers. The boats were in a hurry to reach the canal. The dark little houses of Kruglogorye were for them but a feature of the passing scene, an insignificant detail in the film strip marking their passage from Leningrad to the White Sea. Sasha went down the steps and crossed the hospital yard to the wing where the doctor had his quarters. Unnecessarily big and empty quarters. For many years before the Revolution they had been occupied by a rural doctor with many children and domestics. Sasha was told that this doctor, who had been in touch with a revolutionary organisation in St. Petersburg, had been shot by the Whites during the Civil War. For the last two years the rooms had been empty. In anticipation of Dr. Zelenin's arrival someone had attempted to add a homelike touch by hanging starched white curtains at the dining-room windows.

As Sasha gazed at the oak panels of the room he tried to imagine what the former occupants had been like. No doubt they had gathered round this huge table to have tea, read Korolenko aloud, and discussed the fate of Russia. Bearded conspirators had arrived from St. Petersburg and transferred illegal pamphlets from one man's boot-top to another's. With a sigh Sasha opened his bag and, feeling that he was committing sacrilege, tossed some smoked sausage, a loaf of bread and a knife on to

the table. He ate his meal staring straight at the wall in front of him but keenly aware of the door behind him leading into another big room, which had a door leading into still another big room. Never had he imagined he would be oppressed by excess living-space. What was he to do here all alone? There was no prospect of an increase in his family. Inna was in Moscow. As if she would ever come here! Leave Moscow to come here? Moscow, where there were so many interesting young men —actors, artists, poets—Moscow, where the International Youth Festival was to be held next summer. Sorry, Sasha, but you'll have to look around for a northern beauty—somebody like Dasha.

When he had climbed out of the Board of Health car he had seen a young girl with beautiful fair hair come out of the hospital. She was Dasha Guryanova, a nurse.

She's like Lyubava, he had said to himself (he was fond of drawing literary comparisons). It was women like her who had fitted out the boats of the ancient traders of Novgorod, woven fine linen, sung sad songs, and in moments of crisis carried stones and boiling tar to the tops of towers to be hurled down on the enemy.

That evening, when Dasha had finished her work and taken off her uniform, he had noticed one of those little black oilcloth flowers that were fashionable in Leningrad a few years before pinned to her

dress. Civilisation sometimes assumes hideous forms, he said to himself as he recalled it, and a smile came to his lips.

He got up, brushed the crumbs off the table, strode across the creaking floor boards and looked out of the window. The night was pitch black. He rushed to the switch and turned out the light. The window was transformed into a grey oblong. He heard a rustling noise behind him. He started and began to sing in a loud defiant voice:

*Once upon a time there lived a king,*
*Henry IV was his name....*

He always enjoyed sitting home of an evening in Leningrad. His father's pen could be heard scratching away in the adjoining room, the reflection of street lights played cheerily on the hardwood floor. But here! Why did the shadows pile up so thickly in the corner? Was that someone walking in the next room? Ho-ho, Sir Lancelot, you appear to be afraid of the dark!

Sasha clenched his fists and sang louder than ever:

*He loved the ladies, loved them well,*
*And well did the ladies love him.*
*He was happy as ever a king could be,*
*He danced and sang full merrily,*
*With a tra! and a la! and a tra-la-la!*

*Tra-la-la!* came the echo. The thought of women always makes life seem more cheerful.

He did not turn on the light until he had finished the song about the frivolous French monarch. Then, thumping loudly, he went into the bedroom.

For a long time he lay in the darkness with his eyes wide open, thinking intensely about something. About what? Nothing in particular. As a matter of fact his mind was merely reviewing in haphazard fashion the scenes and experiences of the past two days. The boat-landing on the river, the Board of Health car, the lights along the river-bank, he himself standing like a film star on the deck of the boat waving good-bye, his mother and father so brave that it rent his heart, his friends singing. Inna smiling and pushing back her hair. Dasha smiling and touching the black flower on her dress. Max standing on the pier as red as an Indian and discoursing upon some marvellous exotic land (and not seeing the marvellous land all about him). And he, Sasha? Here he was, in this godforsaken place, when he might have.... Oh, well, he was not going to be an Ionich. He was doing his patriotic duty. Did that sound funny? Do you find it funny, Inna? Who ever thought he'd meet a girl like Inna? And Dasha? Not bad either. Lyubava. Fair hair. Trading boats. Flowers. Down with black flowers! And black windows—down with them, too! Tomorrow I begin studying case histories, he thought.

And with that he fell asleep.

Dr. Zelenin had firmly resolved not to change any of his city habits. As soon as he got out of bed he opened all the windows and began his setting-up exercises. As he was hopping on one foot, somebody came running lightly down the hall, the door flew open, and there stood Dasha.

"Oh!" she gasped on seeing the doctor frozen in an awkward pose.

For a moment they stood gazing wide-eyed at each other, then Sasha began gesticulating absurdly and Dasha bolted. Sasha was mortified by the thought of what he must have looked like. A skinny, long-legged, bespectacled figure in baggy shorts perched on one leg like a stork. Just his luck to have had on those baggy shorts this morning!

"What do you want?" he shouted, trying hard to stop the knocking of his knees.

"They've brought in a new patient, doctor," came faintly from the hall.

"I'll be there in a minute."

He glanced out of the window as he hastily pulled on his pants. Dasha was crossing the yard with a hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle.

The patient, victim of an accident, was lying on the couch in the ante-room. His face was as white as a sheet and beaded with sweat. A limp hand knotted with veins hung down to the floor. Sasha felt

his pulse. Scarcely detectable. Lifted his eyelid. The pupil dilated feebly. He stood up, and only then did he notice a huge bandage soaked with blood on the patient's right hip. Shock.

"What happened?"

"Got caught in an electric saw. He's Pyotr Ishanin from the sawmill."

"Camphor. Caffeine. And get ready for a blood transfusion. First we'll tend to the wound."

After scrubbing his hands, Sasha entered the operating-room. The patient's bandage had been removed and an enormous gash, still bleeding, yawned on his hip. A piece of skin that had been severed by the saw was hanging like a rag from his leg. Dasha—intent, tight-lipped—handed Sasha an injection needle.

"Do you know how to determine his blood group?" he asked her in a whisper.

"Yes, we were taught that," she whispered back.

"Then do it and let me know; meanwhile I'll try to stop the bleeding."

He hurriedly injected novocaine around the wound and applied clips. Out of the corner of his eye he observed the nurse's sure movements. The patient's group was the third. Dasha pushed the blood transfusion apparatus against the operating-table and handed Sasha the needle. As he thrust it into the patient's vein he watched his face. The eyes were wide open and fixed on the ceiling. . . . . .

"How you feeling, buddy?" asked Sasha in a cheery doctor's voice.

"I'm all right," came the faint answer.

Dr. Zelenin felt more composed as he cleaned the edges of the wound. He had not become greatly excited—there had been no time to. But now that the patient had come out of the state of shock and the treating of the injury was proceeding normally, he felt like a machine whose revolutions per second had been considerably cut down. He even began to whistle under his breath. The putting in of the final stitches was done with a flourish for Dasha's benefit, and when all was over he straightened up and heaved a sigh. Only then did he realise with what mechanical efficiency he had done everything, never for a moment doubting his ability to cope with the situation. Medical School appeared to have given its students the right training habits.

"I'll be back in twenty minutes," he said to the nurse, and with a sense of exhilaration went out on to the porch. Suddenly he started as if from an electric shock. The anti-tetanus injection! He ought to have given it first of all! How this had been dinned into their ears at their traumatology lectures! He rushed back, threw open the door of the outer office and found himself staring into Dasha's steady eyes.

"Did ... did I tell you to ... to give him an anti-tetanus injection?" The first half of the question sounded feeble, the second—grim. Instantly he

was filled with contempt for himself. You scum! You'd like to shift the blame on to this girl, wouldn't you? He was about to open his mouth again—

"Yes, you did, Alexander Dmitrievich," said Dasha. "I gave it. Here, I've jotted down the series number."

Sasha sank against the door-jamb. They smiled at each other understandingly and he realised she would never tell anybody what an absurd figure he had cut when she had come for him that morning. She was wholly to be relied upon.

His first real sense of perturbation came when he made his round of the wards.

There were some very complicated cases. They could not be properly diagnosed without laboratory analyses, but the laboratory was closed for want of a specialist. It looked as if he himself would have to master the technique and he had even forgotten how to calculate leucocyte percentages. He would have to read up on it. And whom could he consult? Not that feldsher*, certainly! How was he to cure all these people? He resorted to novocaine blockades as a means of steadying his nerves—he always felt better when wielding a needle or a scalpel: they were something concrete to hold on to and they gave immediate results. But how could he practise

* Feldsher—a medical worker whose qualifications are between those of a nurse and a doctor.—*Tr.*

therapeutics without making analyses? In their third year Professor Gushchin had once said to them: "*Chirurgia est obscura, terapia—obscurissima.*"

These words, spoken by the old and slightly cynical doctor, had shocked the students at the time. They had learned to read tomograms and electrocardiographs, and to use complicated instruments for registering basic functional disorders. On graduating they had felt that all diagnostic mysteries could be solved by the application of these marvels of technical achievement. But at present Dr. Zelenin felt like a mediaeval explorer who has just passed through the Pillars of Hercules and finds himself confronting a vast and unknown sea that has got to be crossed. Here in Kruglogorye it was as if he had been thrown back half a century, transplanted into the past. True, feldsher Makar Ivanovich had been practising satisfactorily for three years without X-rays and a laboratory. Patients streamed to him from distant lumber camps, sawmills, villages, even men working on passing boats came to seek his aid. Makar Ivanovich was not troubled by fears and doubts. At the local Board of Health he had the reputation of being a dashing diagnostician. While leafing through case histories, Sasha came upon such gems as "General shake-up from falling off a cart."

At the end of his first week Dr. Zelenin called a meeting of the hospital staff. Everybody turned out:

five nurses, the feldsher, the charwomen, the bookkeeper, the manager, and Filimon, the stableman. All these people, bound by ties of family and friendship, looked with suppressed smiles, with curiosity and distrust at this stranger, this thin and restless youth who had become their chief. In the two years since the death of Klavdia Nikitichna, the last doctor to practise in Kruglogorye, the staff had grown used to leading a calm quiet life. There were not many patients because all the serious cases were sent to the regional centre, some thirty miles away. Makar Ivanovich saw that the hospital fulfilled its plan by taking in old women on whom he practised diagnostics. Dasha Guryanova and Zina Petukhova, who had returned to Kruglogorye that spring after finishing a course in nursing, wrote a letter to the local Board of Health, saying: "Either send us a doctor or close the hospital, for we cannot conscientiously go on working this way." At the Board of Health Sasha had been told how things stood and warned to rely only on the young Komsomol nurses —all the rest were shirkers. But now, a week later, as he sat facing the group crowded into his little office, he began to wonder if this was really so. Take that old bear Makar Ivanovich—perhaps he would be quite different if one could find a means of rousing him, discover some vital spot that would respond to the touch. And he remembered that the purple drink-bloated face of Filimon, the stableman, looked

gentle and absorbed whenever he rubbed down the hospital's colt. And was not the air of superiority worn by the book-keeper inspired by his fear of not being recognised as a man of education? And the faces of those young nurses were very frank and pleasant—Dasha's was even pretty (but this was hardly the time or place to think of *that*). He knocked on the desk with his fountain-pen and began speaking in a voice that sounded strangely deep to him.

"Silence, comrades!" (There's the big chief for you! he thought to himself, and fancied how his pals would parody the scene.) "Comrades! Our hospital is the biggest medical centre in the entire Kruglogorye District. The field of our activity includes the town of Kruglogorye, the dock on the lake, a sawmill, five collective farms and a lumber camp. And I have been told that a big hydrotechnical construction job has been undertaken at Crystal Promontory, only four miles away. Until they have their own hospital and their own doctors it will be up to us to serve them, and that means serving a large-scale construction project. As you can see, the task facing our hospital of twenty-five beds is not an easy one, and we must prove ourselves equal to it. At the present moment we're not equal to it, comrades." (How easily one mouths these trite phrases!) "I hope I won't hurt anyone's feelings if I go further and say that our hospital is a perfect 19th-century model."

(Take it easy, man, take it easy!) "In an age of television and electronics we are working in the dark, without laboratory analyses and X-rays. When I investigated I found out we own laboratory equipment and an X-ray, but they are in a sad state of neglect. Why? Is there nobody here to take care of such things? There is. The trouble is that nobody cares, nobody thinks it important. Take you, Makar Ivanovich—"

Makar Ivanovich gave a little start and began to wiggle the fingers crossed on his belly. He had had his dinner only half an hour before and now tiny little feet were pattering round and round inside his head, lulling him to sleep. The fervent remarks of the young doctor came to his ears like the sputtering of distant fireworks, and everything about him grew blurred as the focus of his eyes relaxed.

I shouldn't have said this, thought Sasha. The old guy may take offence.

But it was too late to retreat.

"Tell us how you treat your patients, Makar Ivanovich. What medicines do you prescribe?"

"Medicines?"

"Yes."

"It all depends on individual reaction," said Makar Ivanovich with his customary air of importance. "If it's headache I prescribe pyramidon, if it's stomach—besalol. . . ."

"Makar Ivanovich also goes in for enemas," put in Dasha mischievously.

"But you can't do that, Makar Ivanovich!" exclaimed Dr. Zelenin. "Such an approach was old-fashioned even in Chekhov's day. 'For the head, for the stomach.' Have you looked into this book recently?"

He held out a fat volume entitled *Handbook for Rural Feldshers.* It was an excellent book written by a famous doctor who had devoted his life to relieving the sufferings of his fellow-men. In Leningrad Sasha had been urged to take it with him as an invaluable reference book as well as a sure cure for quackery. Makar Ivanovich polished his spectacles, held the book at arm's length and read the title out loud.

"Young man," he pronounced in a quavering voice, "I've been practising here for thirty years. I.... I...." He got to his feet and began clumsily taking off his white coat. "I ... I served at the front.... I.... Ekh! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Fat and ungainly, he sidled out of the office. A minute later Sasha glanced out of the window and saw his bulky form in belted tunic stumbling away on thin legs encased in rough leather boots. It was rather touching.

Sasha cast a cautious glance over the people in front of him and tried to guess how they were taking it. Dasha alone smiled her approval. He found it rather unfeeling of her. Did he really? Was not

his disapproval put on in self-defence? The girl was too attractive. Her eyes were too bright, the line of her neck too perfect. He turned away and a fleeting image of Inna passed before his mind's eye.

What was he to say next? He felt sorry for Makar Ivanovich and wanted to add a word in his own justification, but, fearing to "undermine his authority", he went on with his speech as if nothing had happened.

"And so, comrades, we've got to put things in shape with our own hands, and we've got to begin with the laboratory and the X-ray. Of course we'll have to send to town for mechanics to mend the equipment. Have we funds from which we can pay them, Grigori Savelyevich?" he asked, turning to the book-keeper.

"We'll find the funds."

"And we'll send one of our nurses to take a course as an X-ray assistant." (But not Dasha!) "We cannot work any longer without an X-ray. As for the laboratory, I myself will undertake this job with the help of Dasha Guryanova, if she is willing. Are you willing, Dasha?"

## DOCTOR ZELENIN

As he sat in the local eating-house having dinner the next afternoon, he gazed out on the wide expanse of the lake. The day was dull and windy and

ragged waves heaved against the horizon. The seagulls, with ruffled feathers, sought shelter under overturned boats on the shore.

Like a storm at sea, he thought, and presently his view was quickly and noiselessly distorted by drops of rain striking obliquely against the window-pane.

"It's begun to rain, Dr. Zelenin," a waitress called out to him. "Don't go for a while, it may pass."

She brought him a glass of beer with froth drooping like a wig over the rim.

"This must seem a dreary place to you after Leningrad," she said. "I'd die of loneliness, I'm sure."

"I have no time to be lonely, Lyuba," he replied. "I'm too busy."

"Then what makes you look so down in the mouth? So long and lean in the face?"

He lifted his eyes from his glass and let them slide over her middle-aged plumpness.

"I don't know, it's just that I'm restless, I suppose."

"Restless? It's the young blood in your veins makes you restless. Better to be restless than melancholy."

Dr. Zelenin not only took his dinners here, he spent his evenings here as well. He explained it to himself as his "desire to study human nature" but knew perfectly well there were other reasons. The only thing that distinguished this house from the others in Kruglogorye was that lights shone in its windows

until midnight. Tobacco smoke billowed in the air. There was a constant banging of doors, hum of voices, sounds of laughter, wailing of an accordion. Men joked, quarrelled, held serious discussions. But the place attracted him mainly because it was the haunt of truck drivers, a lively crew. Yesterday they were in Petrozavodsk, tomorrow they would be off to Vologda, Arkhangelsk, Belomorsk, Leningrad. Sasha would stand watching them clean and repair their mud-caked trucks, follow them into the eating-house, take a seat near them so that he could listen to their accounts of the different towns they had been to. He seemed to be trying to convince himself of the reality of places other than this desolate Kruglogorye. Yet he was loth to admit to himself that the noisy eating-house was for him a window leading into the big world beyond.

"Little grey raindrops clung to the pane, grimacing at him. . . ." The beer's foul. Watered. Could Lyuba be guilty? Hardly. Probably the supplyman. Makar Ivanovich didn't show up for work today. Filimon says he saw him lying down with a wet towel on his forehead. I'm a skunk. Never think of anybody but myself. I must go and have a heart-to-heart talk with him. No, I must be firm. What if he *is* old? If you work at all, work conscientiously. Gee, aren't you the man of principle, Sir Lancelot! You demand a lot of others, but what about yourself? Take your relations with Inna, for instance. Why

haven't you phoned her in Moscow? Afraid? Or is there some other reason? What if she should say: "Sasha? I ... er ... beg your pardon, what Sasha? Oh-h, I remember...." Moscow. Moscow. Kruglogorye calling. What a joke. Wonder if I'll be able to hold out here long. It's worse than I thought. Try as I may to keep busy, to fill up every minute of my time, the moment comes when I'm left alone with those gaping windows. And tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.... True, if there hadn't been that game with the Shoemakers, I wouldn't feel so miserable, my evenings would be taken up with Dasha. Dasha in person or with thoughts of her. What? Am I sorry I ever met Inna? Well, now, that's just about the limit.

With horror he realised he could not recall Inna's face. He remembered her—the girl who had flashed like a bird at the edge of his former life—as vaguely and indistinctly as one remembers the characters from a delightful book read long ago. He could not recall the faces of his friends. "La Compassita"... tra-a-la-la!... Aha! He had only to hum a few lines of the tango to make everything come clear: Inna's eyes, blue as the evening sky; her lips, parted as if for a kiss; her fair hair ruffled by the wind. How could he hold on to the fleeting vision? He hadn't even a photograph. And here was Dasha beside him every day, and he felt drawn to her and sensed that she was drawn to him. Was he to cling to the image

of a girl who no doubt had forgotten all about him? Why should he not throw himself heart and soul into the happiness at hand? He felt so very forlorn, gazing alone into the blind eyes of the night!

Dr. Zelenin sighed and looked at his watch. Forty minutes before his office hours began. He had no wish to go out into the rain. He resolved to write a letter to Max.

A storm was raging on the lake but, thanks to the protection of Crystal Promontory, only the strongest blasts reached the town. At regular intervals loose sheets of roofing clattered on top of the eating-house. Nothing could be seen through the window.

"... The first day they wanted to treat me to the pride of the local kitchen: 'boxers' gulash'. Despite my love for the exotic I found the courage to decline and request an honest meat-cake. The meat-cake turned out to be really honest—more meat than bread. Might do our Medical School chefs some good to come on a tour of inspection and see how they're made.

"I'm in love with the local population. The men all go in for hunting and fishing—big, solemn, sinewy men. The women are the usual sort for the most part, with some wonderful exceptions. But you should see the kids, Max! Once as I was passing a kindergarten I peered through the fence and what I saw took my breath away. Hair like ripe rye, eyes like corn-flowers. And my impression is that the peo-

ple are very decent. True, they say that on holidays the men drink like fish, but so far I haven't noticed it.

"Here's a curious thing—I live all alone in an apartment of four enormous rooms. I suggested that they let somebody else have two of them (what do I need them for—breeding mice?) but nobody would hear of it. (What? Put somebody else in the doctor's apartment?) It's something like the White House—Presidents come and Presidents go, but the house goes on for ever.

Neither you nor Vladka has taken the trouble to write to me and you can imagine how I long for letters. Write about anything and everything—sports, your job, what you're reading, what's on your mind, what girls you're going with (Vicky?). Have you been to see my parents?

"At present I do nothing but work, receive as many as forty patients a day. News of the 'Leningrad doctor' has spread all over the district and the sick and the well alike come to be examined. I am mending neglected X-ray and laboratory equipment. It would make your blood boil to see the state it's in. In a word, there's so much to do I have no time to mope and nurse the doubts of my student days. . . ."

At this point a boot kicked open the door and in came Filimon, the hospital stableman. He threw off his hood, wiped his wet red face, winked at the

waitress, and made for the table at which Dr. Zelenin was sitting.

In a week's time Sasha and Filimon had become good friends. Filimon was easy to get on with. A boozer by nature, he was of the opinion that the world was entirely populated with people like himself—hale and hearty fellows who knew how to eat and drink. Forty years of life experience had not shaken this conviction.

"Hi, boss, the chairman's sent for you," he said to Sasha.

"What chairman?"

"Chairman of the Soviet. Yegorov. Just called up. Says you're to be at his office at three sharp. Shall we go?"

Five minutes later they drew up in front of a two-storeyed log building with a faded flag of the Russian Federation flying from the roof. The first floor was occupied by the People's Court, the second by the library and Town Soviet. This was the first time Sasha had been here. As a matter of fact, it was the first time he had been to town at all. His mornings were spent at the hospital, his afternoons, receiving patients, his after-work hours, tinkering with X-ray and laboratory equipment. There were moments when he felt it was panic that made him undertake so much work. The fear of leaving room for other thoughts. The desire to postpone making the

acquaintance of the drab little town that had become the centre of his world.

A sound of voices came from behind the door bearing the sign "Chairman of the Town Soviet". Dr. Zelenin knocked twice, and, when no response came, walked in. The big low-ceilinged room was occupied by a number of workmen in hooded canvas coats similar to the one Filimon was wearing. They were standing about talking in loud voices to a man sitting at the desk. Dark-haired, broad-faced, wearing a khaki tunic, he was drumming on the desk with his fingers and gazing up at his visitors with twinkling eyes from under lowered brows. On catching sight of Dr. Zelenin he struck the desk with his palm.

"Quiet, men," he said; then, with a quick smile: "Dr. Zelenin?" and held out his hand.

Zelenin took the broad hand (he disliked shaking broad hands) and threw himself without invitation into the deep leather chair, thinking: the usual big shot on a local scale. Didn't even go to the trouble of lifting his important backside.

He stole another sidelong glance at the narrow eyes whose twinkle he resented, and very definitely realised he had seen the man before.

One by one the men in canvas coats left the room. The last of them lingered in the doorway to say in a tone of admonition:

"Understand what we're after, Samsonych?"

The chairman laughed. "It's not so hard to understand, Ivan. We'll bring the matter up before the Regional Committee."

When all of them had gone out he shook his head and said ruefully:

"They're people to reckon with, I'll have you know. Log-floaters. You'll have dealings with them yet," he added as he pushed a pack of Kazbek cigarettes towards Sasha.

"Thanks, I prefer Aurora," said Sasha drily, and put his hand into his pocket.

"To tell you the truth, Kazbek is just for company. Here's my brand," and the chairman held up a pack of cheap Priboi. He laughed as if this were a great joke and Sasha found himself liking him.

"I haven't really anything in particular to talk to you about. Just wanted to meet you. You've been here a week and haven't dropped in."

"I've been very busy," said Sasha.

"I know, you've got lots of work there. By the way, there's a little matter.... I've been told...." The man's face grew serious and he began drumming on the desk again. "Please don't misunderstand what I have to say. It's about feldsher Makar Ivanovich."

Sasha gave a start.

"Yes?"

"Don't think I'm speaking to you in an official capacity. Just offering some friendly advice. It's too

bad you offended the old fellow. In front of everybody. It wasn't very considerate of you."

Sasha sat with protruding chin, fingers clutching the arms of the chair, his face burning.

"You don't know much about our life here yet," went on the chairman. "Makar Ivanovich is godfather to a good third of our kids. And how many umbilical cords he has cut! You didn't know that? Well, everybody here does and they all think a lot of him."

Dr. Zelenin leaned forward abruptly.

"And do you know what methods he uses in treating his grateful patients?" he cried. "Wrong, absurd, old-fashioned. Oh, he's a decent sort, I can see that for myself. But he's got into a rut, works in the dark—trial and error. I can't allow such a thing. You speak of being considerate, but I apply the word in a broader sense. True, I hurt his feelings, but I did it for the sake of the tens and hundreds of patients who fall into his hands."

"Yes, being considerate can mean a lot of things." The chairman smiled at him.

Sasha crushed out his cigarette. "Of course," he said with less fire, "there's something in what you say."

As he went down the stairs he racked his brains to remember where he had seen that man before.

At eight o'clock in the evening Sasha went to the post-office to put in a call to Moscow.

"May I smoke?" he asked the telephone operator.

"To your heart's content," she replied.

He sat on the table in the empty unlighted room and watched the girl plug in and out. An ancient switchboard, he thought.

In order to call Moscow she had first to get the district centre, then Leningrad, then Moscow. And to cap everything, Inna's mother was sure to answer the phone and say: "Oh, what a pity! Inna is at the theatre." And with whom she had gone he would never know.

Outside, the wind was driving tattered clouds across the sky. The tops of the tall fir-trees that extended down to the lake shore were bent over. The nearest of the trees brushed a hairy paw against the post-office window. The shadows of night were thickening, the last colours were fading out of the western sky. Dr. Zelenin lit his seventh cigarette. Every inch of his body was tense, from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. He heard the operator making an angry retort on the other side of the plywood partition. Suddenly she knocked and said:

"Your call!"

The receiver whistled, sang, coughed. As through the roar of the sea he heard runs being played on

a piano, an article for a local newspaper being dictated syllable by syllable, something incoherent muttered by another voice, a ticking sound as of a metronome, a cosmic wail that was borne to his ears in slow crescendo. And suddenly through all this chaos came a voice as faint as if from another planet:

"Hello, hello! Sasha! Sasha!"

For almost a minute he shouted into the phone at the top of his lungs. Then he grew silent. The voice of the unspeakably distant girl made its way cautiously, then with growing confidence, through the tangle of wires. "Sasha. Hello, Sasha." When he realised he need shout no longer he said in low tones:

"*Elio utara, Aelita.*"*

"Sasha?" the beloved voice breathed in astonishment at his very ear. "Sasha, of course." Inna laughed. "I, too, felt as if I were descending from Mars. Why haven't you called before? I keep waiting at the phone."

Dr. Zelenin paid thirty-five rubles, charged down the steps of the post-office, and ran out into the middle of the street, where he threw back his head and opened his arms as if to embrace the night sky. He staggered as if drunk as he gazed up at the

* Aelita is the heroine of Alexei Tolstoi's fantastic novel about Mars; the greeting is in the imaginary language of Mars.—*Tr.*

constellations winking brightly between rifts in the clouds. Overhead the telephone wires hummed in the wind. Magic metal threads joining the people of the whole world. Wires, electromagnetic signals cutting through the ether: the runs on the piano, the voice dictating the article, Inna's voice. . . .

A chain of lights moved down the lake, and suddenly a blue searchlight swung away from the towboat and picked the signal tower on the pier out of the darkness. Sasha drew in a deep breath. Now he knew his world was not limited to the log houses of Kruglogorye, that he was living in the enormous contemporary world of the second half of the twentieth century. His fellow-men had woven a network of wires around the globe to connect themselves with one another and help one another. A transport network, a telegraph network, an educational network, a medical network of which he was an integral part. If a plane flying from Moscow, Igarka, or Guadeloupe were to meet with an accident here in Kruglogorye, the news would instantly be wired to world centres, and he, Alexander Zelenin, would offer medical assistance to crew and passengers.

He swung down the board footpath, humming a tune of his own invention, past fences and tiny gardens with lights shining faintly through the leaves, until he came upon a dark and motionless figure. It was Makar Ivanovich.

"Alexander Dmitrievich," said the old man diffi-

dently, "perhaps you would . . . I wanted to ask you if I might borrow that . . . er . . . handbook to look through."

## Chapter IV

## ALL FLAGS ON A VISIT

Dr. Maximov was standing on the pier beside some oil-tanks. Next to him stood a truck driver named Petrov, who bared his gums shockingly when he grinned. The grin gave him a sinister look, but he was really a well-meaning fellow and the most daring driver in the Hygiene Department.

"Looks as if you was going to have to climb the Jacob's ladder, Max," he observed.

They stared at the black and peeling hull of the *Novator* that was slowly approaching with a load of Cuban sugar on board. Mooring ropes were thrown from the deck to the dock and a voice shouted through a megaphone:

"Can you climb the Jacob's ladder, doctor?"

Max waved his hand to signify "Let's have it!", stepped to the edge and looked down. Black oily water heaved between the ship and the piles. Weather-beaten faces grinned down at him from the ship's deck.

They think I can't make it, think I'll wait till the ship hits the dock. A landlubber. A softy. Well, I can only die once!

He took a great spring, flew nine feet through the air, and caught hold of the rope ladder. He heard Petrov gasp behind him. Looking down, he saw a yawning black abyss and shuddered to think how he would have struggled in the cold water and been crushed between the piles and the boat.

Fool! Idiot! What made me do it?

He climbed over the side and saw mocking smiles on the faces of the sailors.

"Where's the chief?" he snapped.

"Here I am, doctor." Down the steps of the spar-deck came a tall young man in blue uniform. He held out his hand with an amiable smile. "Perov's the name."

"Welcome home. Any patients on board?" Max glibly pronounced the first two standard phrases he had learned and was surprised to hear the officer say in reply:

"We have two patients for you."

"Really? What's the matter with them?"

"A crane jib swung out and the hook struck one of our boys in the leg. Afraid it's broken. I don't know what's the matter with the other fellow. Has a high fever. Shall we go to the sick-bay?"

They climbed the steps. Behind them someone whispered:

"Tarzan!"

Dr. Maximov turned sharply round. The sailors grinned. Perov took Max by the arm and led him

across decks, up stairs, down corridors, talking as they went. He was evidently glad to see a new face.

"The voyage wasn't a very pleasant one. Fierce storms on the ocean, and you yourself know what our Baltic Sea's like in autumn. If I'm not mistaken you served on the *Polzunov*, didn't you?"

"I haven't served on anything yet."

"That so? Then come with us. Our old man's due to retire. I mean it, doctor. Ask to be appointed to our ship. You'll like the crew."

"The crew's tops on your bottom?" ventured Max, knowing it was atrocious and glancing up to see how Perov would take it. He ignored it.

"You made a rather startling first appearance. Odd to see such an agile doctor."

He opened a door and allowed Dr. Maximov to precede him. Max found himself in the sick-bay. Along the inner wall stood two double-decked bunks. Opposite them stood another bunk on which lay a man with up-stretched leg. Another man in a white coat, who was standing with his back to the door, turned around when they entered. He had a hypodermic syringe in his hand. Probably giving him a shot of penicillin, thought Max. He was surprised to discover how pleasant it was to get a whiff of hospital smells again and to see the steaming steriliser and the glass cabinet with gleaming instruments on its shelves. The ship's surgeon, a grizzled, sun-

burnt old man, threw him a glum and apprehensive look.

"I rigged up a stretching appliance," he said apologetically, nodding towards his patient's elevated leg. "I'm not sure I did it the right way. Haven't brushed up on my knowledge lately and one gets rusty, you know. Seems you worked in Basseinovaya Hospital, colleague?"

Some take me for a sailor, others for an experienced doctor, and as a matter of fact I'm just nobody, thought Max. Perhaps they're just trying to make fun of me.

He went over to the patient and, to keep up appearances, touched the injured leg.

"It's all right," he said.

The old man's face brightened.

"Would you mind looking at my other patient, too? My diagnosis is pneumonia of the right lung, but one can't be sure without an X-ray."

Funny what little confidence he has, thought Max. He's an old doctor, must have been practising for forty years, and yet look how he makes up to a greenhorn like me. I'm sure he asked me about the hospital just to be flattering.

The second case was simpler. An ominous crackling could clearly be heard in the stethoscope.

"Both of them must be sent to the hospital," said Dr. Maximov.

He left the sick-bay and, escorted by the First Mate and ship's surgeon, inspected the cabins, the engine room, the store-rooms and the galley. In the galley he minutely examined the chopping-block. Every quarantine doctor has his weakness. Old Dr. Dumpfer, Max's and Vladka's chief, had a weakness for chopping-blocks. He painstakingly searched for cracks in them, railed at cooks for not sprinkling salt on them, and if a ship had no chopping-block he refused to allow it to set sail until it acquired one. As a follower of the Dumpfer school, Max too railed at the cook and ordered him to get a new chopping-block. This done, he went into the First Mate's cabin to draw up documents and fill in an endless number of forms. The First Mate made a face as Max handed him one paper after another to be signed.

"By the time I'm ready to go ashore I'll have a cramp in my hand," he grumbled.

"When did you last chlorinate the drinking-water?" asked Dr. Maximov in an expressionless voice. "When did you take on your last supply of fresh water? How many passengers are you carrying?"

"Wha-at?!" drawled the First Mate. "Are you joking, doctor? We've got exactly one passenger—Billy, an Airedale puppy. He stowed away with us in Hull. Want to see him?"

"Later. Notice any rats doing a sort of dance during the voyage?"

The First Mate looked at him nonplussed for a moment, then came closer and said resentfully:

"What do you take me for, a moron?"

"Not at all," said Max in astonishment. "I'm only going through the questions on the formal list. When rats are infected with plague they leap about in a sort of dance."

The First Mate burst out laughing. He was always bursting out laughing.

"Sorry, doc. This is my first voyage as First Mate and I've never been put through the question before. So they do a dance, do they? The hell you say! What sort of a dance, rock-and-roll?"

"What's rock-and-roll?"

"Never heard of it? The latest. The British are nuts on it."

"Something like boogiewoogie?"

"You're behind the times. You ought to see them rock-and-roll! Look like a bunch of escaped lunatics. You'd die laughing."

The First Mate opened the drawer of his desk and took out a fat little bottle with a striking label.

"Scotch whisky," he announced triumphantly.

"No, thanks."

"Come on, it's a maritime tradition, doc. You've got to take at least one little swig."

"So long, Sergei. Glad to have met you."

"So long, Max. Don't forget to tell that personnel

director of yours that it's the *Novator* or nothing for you."

"Don't you worry."

Max's head was reeling, but he swung bravely down the deck, waved his hand to the red-faced sailors, and disappeared over the side of the ship.

He was driven back to Quarantine Headquarters where he intended having tea and resting till evening. But as soon as he opened the door the girl at the switchboard handed him a wire reading: "Meet English ship *Duke of Normandy* in canal." He must board the launch again and go to meet it.

Once more a great hull loomed in front of him, this time painted a grey-blue, and he had to climb the Jacob's ladder while the ship was still in motion. He made a leap for it and again experienced the sensation of being suspended in space above an alien element. Through his mind flashed the thought: respectable doctors are sitting in warm clean offices thumping patient's chests and knitting ponderous brows, while here I am swinging like a sausage between heaven and earth.

As on the *Novator*, the decks of the English ship were lined with idle sailors. A tall Negro, glistening with zippers from throat to ankle, flashed him a smile and saluted with two fingers. Dr. Maximov asked to see the captain. The Negro saluted again and indicated that Max was to follow him. Two other sailors joined them. They pointed Max out to

each other, tapped him lightly on the shoulder and said in broken Russian:

"Student? *Khorosho*!"

Max promptly corrected them, declaring he was a doctor, but the sailors evidently did not understand him. They roared with laughter and pounded him on the shoulder. "Student. Student. *Khorosho*!"

A lean and long-legged captain got up as he entered, held out his hand and spoke at great length, but the only words Max understood were "sit down" and "sir", a word which was repeated several times. Imagine him, Alexei Maximov, being called "sir"! Gathering up his courage, he garbled a few dozen English words. The captain screwed up his face to listen and, when he had finished, said:

"Perhaps you speak English? French? German?"

How bitterly Max now regretted his wholesale cutting of English lectures, his hurried copying of vocabulary lists and translations out of the girls' notebooks just before the lesson!

Evening came. In the rays of the searchlights his launch darted from one ship to another. Dr. Maximov clambered up Jacob's ladders, breathed in the musty smell of galleys, filled in documents, complied with maritime traditions. Now here, now there, the huge form of an approaching ship would blot out the lights winking in the darkness. Rare glimpses of the motionless stars and of buildings in silhouette along the shore reminded him that he had not

always lived such a life, and suggested the odd thought that all this was happening not to him but to somebody else.

In the morning Dr. Maximov handed over his duties to Dr. Kozlov, went to bed and slept like a log. After being on duty for twenty-four hours a quarantine doctor is free for three days. Max spent most of the first day sleeping—he had reconciled himself to the necessity of it. On this particular occasion he slept ten hours on end. He opened his eyes upon a soft grey twilight and his first thought was: Where am I? Instinctively he reached for the cigarettes on the window-sill. The bed opposite him was empty. He had not seen Vladka for several days; the latter had been swallowed up by civilisation, had become enmeshed in a tangle of telephone numbers, mysterious initials, forgotten names jotted down by an unsteady hand in the light of a street lamp. Max was left to spend his leisure in solitude. That evening he went to the Public Library, where he read the latest periodicals until his eyes ached.

## AUTUMN AGAIN

Slim girls and striking-looking young men in glasses were walking up and down the corridor. Several couples were standing at the windows pretending to be gazing at the festoons of light against the autumn

dusk. How many student love affairs had had their beginning here in the Public Library!

Max went out into the hall with a collection of gaudy magazines under his arm. He glanced cynically at the couples at the windows, recalling that not so many years before he himself had dreamed of meeting a sweet little thing with enormous eyes and a volume of Blok's poetry in her hands. Later he came to the conclusion it was a lot easier and more pleasant to pick up a girl at a dance: there one did not have to think of clever things to say.

I can imagine what that chap with the mop of hair is telling the blonde, he said to himself. Something about Picasso, no doubt, and all the time wondering how he can date her. The blonde turned round and he saw it was Vera. It was too late for him to retreat and he definitely felt weak in the knees as he advanced.

"Hello," he murmured casually in passing. Vera smiled and held out her hand. There was nothing to do but take it, look into her smiling eyes and listen to what she was saying.

"I thought you were in the middle of the Atlantic by now. This is Foma Bach."

"Glad to meet you," murmured the mop, his face expressing utter indifference to everything on earth.

"Who's that guy?" asked Max when he and Vera were alone. "Looks interesting."

"He is interesting. A student of the School of In-

dustrial Art. We were talking about the post-impressionists."

Max chuckled. Vera lifted an eyebrow.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Nothing. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Why not?"

"This is not the place for scientific pursuits."

"I don't come here for science but to—"

"Raise your cultural level? Like having a season ticket to symphony concerts? Isn't the professor afraid to let you out alone? There are a lot of post-impressionists hanging about."

Vera lowered her head and said in a low voice full of bitterness:

"Why are you always so cutting, Max? Why are you always jeering at me?"

Why don't you send me to the devil? Why don't you slap my face for me? Why have you become so revoltingly meek and defenceless, like a repentant sinner? Max said to himself. Suddenly he saw the hurt look in her eyes and realised this was not the same Vera he had sat with on a load of hay when, as first-year students, they had gone to a collective farm to help with the harvesting; not the same Vera he had gone skating with the following year, or that he had performed with in their annual class show. He realised that that Vera no longer existed, and the Vera he was talking to was a strange woman with requirements he had no knowledge of.

Vera raised her head, pushed back her hair and smiled, as if freeing herself and him from some oppressive thought.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Eight."

"I'm leaving. Perhaps you'll ... see me home?"

"Just a minute," said Max to his own surprise. "I have to hand in these magazines."

The wet pavements were strewn with maple leaves. In the swinging light of the street lamps it seemed as if a flock of crazy geese had just gone waddling down the street. Max and Vera followed slowly in the tracks of the geese, Max with lowered head, watching as if from a great height the stride of his heavy boots and the quick steps of Vera's suède slippers. Vera was wearing a new coat narrowing towards the hem. She was hatless, and the damp wind stirred her hair. It was not raining, but the air was saturated with moisture; one could almost drink it, suck it in through one's teeth. Strange as it might seem, Max loved such weather, and he knew Vera did too.

"... not before spring, I'm afraid. Boring? Not particularly. True, nothing but hygiene and sanitation, but then there's the compensation of naval tradition.... What's that? Hard to put it in words. Yes, all our class-mates have got jobs. Stolbov, the sage, has got himself connected up with food supply—made sure of his beefsteak and buttered buns.

Vladka's doing the same thing I am. He's feeling fine, enjoying life. No idea where he is at this moment. Oh, yes, we're still friends. Too sociable to suit me. Sasha? I suppose we *were* like Siamese twins. He's in Kruglogorye. Somewhere on Onega Lake. I've had one letter from him—a long one. He's working so hard he has no time to be lonely. Of course that's easy to say when one doesn't happen to be out in the wilds oneself. After all, Sasha has a girl in Moscow. Yes, Sasha. Sasha Zelenin. Why are you laughing? A girl like any other, looks a little like you, except—"

"Except what?"

"She's about three years younger."

"That's not what you wanted to say."

"No, it isn't."

By tacit agreement they did not press the point.

They were almost at Sadovaya Street, where they were to part. On reaching Yeliseyev's shop they stopped to contemplate the piles of tinned food on display in the window. Vera gave a sigh.

"Why the sigh?" asked Max. For some reason she seemed very close to him at this moment. He felt an urge to put his arm on her shoulder, go with her into the shop and buy something for their supper.

"For no particular reason," she replied; then, after a little pause, "So you're satisfied with your present life?"

"Satisfied? I don't know. It's too soon to say. Yes-

terday I felt a longing to get back to clinical work. But I've got cheerful prospects: the sea."

"If I'm not mistaken, there won't be much clinical work at sea."

"But there'll be things to make up for it. Seeing the world, for instance. When I was a kid I went in for stamp-collecting and dreamed of going to all sorts of exotic places. Tasmania, for instance. Stamps, colourful maps with numbers and exotic names on them. Sometimes I had the insane idea that all these places were imaginary, non-existent, invented by someone's playful fancy. And now I'll have the opportunity to see them and smell them and taste them for myself."

"And later? Surely you won't go travelling about all your life?"

"I don't know. Why not?"

"You'll get tired of it and want to settle down to real work."

"Isn't that real work?"

"Certainly not," she said with conviction.

He gave a disparaging wave of the hand.

"It doesn't matter. I don't have a five-year plan. I'm a human being, not an institution, and in our day and age a human being ought to live for the present."

"Nonsense," snapped Vera.

Max gave a little laugh.

"You, like a lot of other people, are labouring

under an illusion. 'Plans for the future', 'creative work'—you pronounce the words with a quiver in your voice, as if they were holy. What do people work for? Work for work's sake? Bunk! Some work to eat, drink, and be merry. Others work for higher motives—to become eminent scholars, win fame and distinction. It would be difficult to find a hundred individuals sufficiently elevated and disinterested to work for the sheer joy of creating something. Oh, of course it's nice if a person finds his work interesting, but that isn't the main thing in life."

"I disagree," said Vera sharply. "What's the main thing, then? Food?"

"For a lot of people, unfortunately, it's food."

"And for you?"

"For me?" He shrugged his shoulders. "You'd think I was putting on airs if I told you."

"So my opinion means something to you?" she asked quickly.

He looked at her in astonishment. Here was a right-about-face for you! All further thoughts were knocked out of his mind by the sight of an extraordinary gleam in her eye.

Impossible! But why? Am I a dunce? A moron? We've been friends for six years and never once in all that time has she guessed I love her. Why should she look at me now in that strange way?

"Let's go," he said, taking a cigarette out of his pocket and lighting up.

Not until they reached the bus stop did he find the courage to look into her face again. It was pensive and sorrowful. He was undone. She gave a toss of her head as if once more casting off a load, and smiled in her calm and gentle way.

"Why don't you ever come to see us, Max? Father often asks about you. What if I am married? Vladka, I know, holds it against me—he was in love with me once. But you and I are just friends, aren't we?"

"We are," he replied coldly. "Here's your bus. I'll drop in as a friend of the family. Regards to your father. The professor won't mind?"

Her coolness disarmed him. He was fully aware that what had passed between them today had given her the advantage. And as if in confirmation of this she laughed and patted him on the cheek in farewell before jumping on the bus.

Max was left standing and staring after the monster carrying away the girl he loved. A minute later he took aim at a rubbish can, neatly flipped his cigarette butt into it, and set off to have supper in an automat.

## THIS IS THEIR HOME

The port was no longer a strange chaotic world to them. On the contrary, as soon as they passed through the main gates they were cut off from the hustle and bustle of the city where at every step one

was confronted by question-marks, large and small, and found themselves in a world that was one hundred per cent male and dominated by perfectly concrete conceptions such as fuel, freight, and alcohol.

In the silence of the night one could hear, as in a dream, the hoot of shunting locomotives, snatches of radio music coming from the houses of port workers, the dull thump of feet on asphalt.

Maximov and Karpov walked along briskly and in step. They said nothing, each engrossed in his own thoughts.

ALEXEI MAXIMOV: What am I, a windbag? Posing to Vera as a heartless cynic when all the time I love her. Where's the logic? Tomorrow I'll go and tell her everything. Let her know. And if she laughs at me? I couldn't take it. Ought I to tell Vladka? No, why should I lose a friend? Better to stick together. Like soldiers. Like in Ives Montand's song. With a flask on the hip and a song on the lip. What would Sasha do in such a fix? Sasha. Wonder how he's getting on in that Kruglogorye of his? Crazy idealist! What were those fine phrases he invented?—a feeling for your buddies, answering to future generations. Pretty words. We'll see how he feels after a year of Kruglogorye. Hope he doesn't take to drink. All right, let's accept the slit trench. But why should my slit trench be in the dullest, dingiest corner of the globe? Just as at the front:

one fellow digs into the earth, the other soars up into the sky. Well, I'm going to soar whenever I can. In the final analysis we're just a bunch of poor miserable creatures. How is it put in that poem?—"We are guests of the earth, here but for a night." So is there any sense in wasting time in fighting? Yes, there is. In fighting for love, for instance; or for your country, or for socialism. Aha! So I *am* a patriot. So I *have* got feelings.... Hell, I wish we'd put to sea. Things'll look simpler then—nothing but sea and sky. I'll be able to get my bearings then. I must ask to be assigned to the *Novator*. Meanwhile I must stop moping and make good use of my time—read some deep books, go to concerts and museums.

VLADISLAV KARPOV: The glass walls of the operating-theatre, the crackle of electro-coagulators, clipped words, white caps, deft fingers ... all of this next door to the house she lives in—almost next door, not more than three hundred yards down the embankment. Wonderful how exactly the embankment is reflected in the water. Only the houses are twice as tall and the trees grow upside down, and people walk right side up and upside down, like on playing-cards. I'm the King of Diamonds, she's the Queen of Diamonds. *Was*. Now she's the Queen of Hearts. I haven't changed, but I live in a different place. Actually in the same city, but it might be on the other side of the globe. Funny how every-

thing has changed, become part of the distant past. She never loved me, never believed in me. Maybe we'll meet by accident five or ten years from now. She a plump woman of science; me a sea dog.... God, if we'd only hurry and go to sea! I can imagine the stir it'll make among my friends the first time I come home from a voyage. Maybe even Vera will get wind of it. I'll bring back a branch of coral and present it to—Little Dorrit. Won't that be a joke! Maybe I'll up and marry the first girl who comes along. I'd better ask Max what he thinks about it. Hi, there, Max, old boy. Something queer about him today—one moment he's up, the next he's down—excited about something. Look, he's stepping out like a soldier—"left, right, left, right, the bugles blow, the banners fly, the girls are touched by such a sight, the soldier goes to win or die...!"

He began to sing. Max started and glanced at him in amazement. Vladka was singing the very song that had been going through his own mind. The same thing had often occurred when he was with Sasha Zelenin.

"Our minds must be tuned to the same wavelengths."

"You're a mystic, Max."

"How else can you explain it?"

"There are lots of things in this world that can't be explained," said Vladka with a sigh.

The wandering lights of District 3 were behind

them. In front of them all was dark and quiet. Out of the shadows rose the silhouette of the Quarantine Building. The single window that had a light in it hung in the darkness like a bathysphere in the depths of the sea. This was their home. Huge, empty, creaking, forbidding, unheated—but theirs. "My home is my castle," says the Englishman. Max recalled all his temporary dwelling-places. He had grown fond of each of them, yet had always been anxious to go away. Where to?

The ray of a searchlight swung across the sky like the leg of a giant compass. Falling, it snatched the profile of the port out of the darkness. And there in the distance gleamed the line of the horizon. How good to have the horizon always before you! How good that the earth is round!

## Chapter V
## DASHA

"Nonsense, Mama. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I don't, don't I? I'm telling you exactly what happened. I saw it myself—that doctor of yours went running down the shore of the lake in his underclothes, chasing a ball with a lot of youngsters, mere schoolboys."

"In his volley-ball suit, not his underclothes. Alexander Dmitrievich is training a volley-ball team.

And a very good thing it is. Sports are neglected here."

Dasha's mother slammed the pan of fried eggs down on the table in front of her daughter.

"Neglected! You'll be neglected one of these days—left high and dry."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

With that she turned and went out into the shed. In a minute she came back with a dish of pickles and sat down next to Dasha.

"I'm afraid for you, daughter," she said, stroking the girl's hair. "The women are gossiping. They say he's making up to you, but he's got a girl in Moscow. Calls her up almost every day. Zoya who works at the post-office says he hands out as much as 50 rubles to babble with her about nothing."

Dasha coloured.

"Stop it, Mama, I won't hear another word. Alexander Dmitrievich and I work together and that's all. There's nothing between us."

She jumped up, snatched up her coat and brief case, and went out.

So that's how it is! she said to herself. I've become a rival—and to whom? A Moscow girl!

She wanted to break into a run, but, remembering her high calling, she lifted her chin and walked along the board footpath with proper dignity.

I'm pretty—yes I am, not just attractive, but really

pretty. I wonder what she's like. Thin, I suppose—all those Moscow girls are. From riding up and down escalators.

Dasha's mother would have been surprised if she had known the trend she had given to her daughter's thoughts. Dasha had only pretended to be indignant. As a matter of fact she was filled with unaccountable joy and the suspense one feels just before a film begins. Her mother had put it very plainly: the doctor was paying court to her and a Moscow girl at the same time. Which meant Dasha must be quite grown up.

But surely, she thought uneasily, I'm not in love with him, am I? It's just that he's such a good doctor and is so friendly and sociable. That's what I like about him. He's not a bit good-looking, can't be compared with Fyodor. Fyodor's good-looking but doesn't attract me. I don't suppose I love either of them. Once I fall in love it will be with an awful bang. I wonder who the man will be? Certainly not Alexander Dmitrievich. I just like to work with him.

It was with her mind filled with such thoughts that she reached the hospital, and on turning in at the gate caught sight of Dr. Zelenin, hatless and coatless and still chewing his breakfast, dashing across the yard.

He's crazy, she said to herself. He'll catch cold. And how silly he looks. How could a girl fall in love with a man like that?

Dr. Zelenin dashed across the yard without so much as pulling on his jacket because he had been called to the telephone. Could it be Inna at such an early hour? They had agreed to call each other up in turn so as to share the expense.

The book-keeper was sitting in the waiting-room beside the telephone. Every morning he handed Sasha a heap of bills and letters. Sasha would open the envelopes, read the lengthy instructions, professional "advice", statistical forms to be filled in, and wearily thrust them into the desk drawer. Even more wearily would he glance through the book-keeper's maze of calculations.

"Please sign these accounts, doctor," said the book-keeper this morning.

"You'll get me into trouble yet, you and your figures," said Sasha.

The book-keeper chuckled, deriving satisfaction from the mysterious power he wielded as keeper of the books. His dry pretentiousness and his endless papers, dull as an aching tooth, were particularly repugnant to Sasha at this moment, when the telephone receiver was lying on the table with Inna's voice (surely) at the other end of the line.

"Who is calling?" he asked, expecting a knowing smile in response.

"The chairman of the Town Soviet."

Sasha picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"Morning, Dr. Zelenin. Bad news. An epidemic of flu has broken out at Crystal Promontory. Half of our bulldozers are lying idle."

"I know. I had intended going over there this morning."

"I'm going over myself on business connected with house building. I can take you along."

"Thanks."

"Meet me at the eating-house as soon as you can."

Dr. Zelenin turned up his coat collar and pulled his scarf tighter as he paced up and down the lake shore in front of the eating-house. He still went without a hat, to the consternation of the local inhabitants. Here on the shore of the lake there could be no doubt that winter was at hand. Shivers ran up and down his spine at the sight of the heavy snow clouds rolling down from Karelia in the north, of the heaving black water and the bushes stripped as bare as barbed wire. He turned back to the street. It was empty except for a lone cripple in a blue raincoat making his way on crutches along the footpath. The chimneys of the houses emitted grey wisps of smoke that were instantly pressed down to the earth. The cripple advanced vigorously. Sasha started on catching sight of his broad red face. Two impressions of this face instantly rose in his memory: one received in Leningrad, on the Palace Embank-

ment (a flushed red face with bleary eyes; "What does your gauge register, or rather, how's your course charted?"); the other here in Kruglogorye ("Here's my brand," laughed the man in the khaki tunic sitting at the desk).

So that's why he didn't get up when he offered me his hand! thought Sasha. How is it I didn't recognise him? Odd. But perhaps it isn't him? What did he say his name was that time?—Sergei Yegorov. That's right. I'll try it.

"Good morning, Comrade Yegorov."

"Good morning, doctor. The car's filling up, be here in a minute. We'll have a breath of fresh air while we're waiting." He inhaled deeply a few times as if carrying out doctor's orders, then turned towards the lake and said:

"I've come to love this place. Might think I'd been born here."

"I thought you had been," said Sasha.

"No, I'm from Voronezh. My wife and I returned to ruins after the war—couldn't even find my parents' graves. So my wife brought me here, to where she was born. But here, too, we found nothing but ruins. Big battles were fought in these parts. The Finns trained their minethrowers on it. They had an underground fort not far away."

A new jeep with a canvas top drove up at this point. The two men climbed into the back seat. Yegorov explained that the direct road to Crystal

Promontory was not ready yet and they would have to take a roundabout route some twelve miles long.

The car speeded along the rain-washed dirt road. The bare branches of autumn woods flashed by on either side. They passed through three villages. Ramshackle lop-sided huts stood on either side of the road. The plywood patches on the windows were like white film over blind eyes. Some of the windows were entirely boarded up. Twice they almost ran over pigs as lean as dogs. Sasha was shocked.

"What poverty!" he exclaimed under his breath. "How do you explain it?"

Yegorov sighed noisily, as old men do.

"That's what's happened to our collective farms, didn't you know?"

How was he to know? In his innocence he had always identified rural communities with the summer resorts he was familiar with near Leningrad. He had been indifferent to the newspaper articles warning of the alarming condition of agriculture. Of late Leningrad shops had been filled to overflowing with food. He suddenly felt uncomfortable, as if he had said something tactless. Clearly his question had touched a sore spot. But Yegorov was looking cheerful again, was even jocular.

"Heard the latest joke about collective farms? The members of a certain farm called a meeting to discuss how they could help the students who were being sent to gather in the harvest. How d'ye like

that? And that's very near the truth—it's not the students who come to help us, but us, the few of us who are left, who help the students. The country's been abandoned—all the village folk have gone to the towns. But little by little they're coming back, they're even building new houses for themselves."

And true enough, behind the line of rickety huts Sasha caught sight of the white boards of new houses.

"Look there, the Ferapontov brothers are putting up a regular villa," said Yegorov in a voice with a youthful ring. "Just you wait, in another year or two things'll be humming."

The jeep spurted to the top of a hill from which Sasha got a view of the big construction site. Crystal Promontory was a triangle of pine forest jutting out into the lake. Several barracks for building workers and a dozen small houses had been erected along the water front in the shelter of a wooded slope. Two lines of trucks were moving to and from the site, where excavators seemed to be bowing and scraping to each other.

The driver took the descent at breakneck speed, almost swerving into the ditch at the side of the road to avoid a monster-like truck skidding on the ascent.

"Pyotr! Are you mad!" shouted Yegorov.

"Don't you worry, Sergei Samsonovich, we'll get there safe and sound," laughed the driver.

The car drew up in front of one of the barracks. Yegorov and Sasha went into the office of the chief engineer. Men in padded jackets and canvas mackintoshes were sitting against the wall on either side of the room. The desk at the far end was occupied by the chief engineer, a sallow-faced man with an enormous brow, who raised his eyes as they came in. Sparse locks that formed a little wedge on his forehead saved him from being classified as bald.

"Hello!" he called out to Yegorov.

"Greetings!" barked Yegorov like a marshal inspecting troops as he stumped up to the desk and shook the chief engineer's hand. "Look, I've brought you a doctor—and you say there is no God!"

A murmur came from the men sitting against the walls. Sasha felt a stab of resentment. "Brought" him! As if he wouldn't have come of his own accord! Demonstratively, as if for spite, he began shaking hands with everybody. They seemed to like it.

"Looks as if he knows something, that boy," he heard somebody remark behind his back.

The chief engineer made a gesture of despair.

"Things are pretty bad, we've almost been brought to a standstill, doctor," he said. "That unwelcome foreigner, Madame la Grippe, has put forty per cent of our people on their backs. But I rather think some of them are trying to pull the wool over our eyes. Our feldsher's not tough enough."

"Oh, I say, Yuri Petrovich," protested a man sitting in the corner.

"It's the truth. You're not tough enough. We've got some hard-boiled fellows here, doctor. Ex-convicts. It complicates things."

Sasha liked the chief engineer. He had often met this type of construction chief in stories and films: a man with a weary look, strong-willed and sarcastic, who looked at people as if no human weakness was hidden from him. Sasha took off his street coat and put on his white doctor's coat.

"If you've no objection I'll go and see my patients."

"I must ask you to pay special attention to Barracks No. 3. That's where the trouble-makers are. Kuzmich, will you show the doctor the way?"

"With pleasure, Yuri Petrovich," came a whining voice, and from out of the corner emerged a mousy, long-nosed man in a fuzzy cap and black coat.

"Timosha!" called the chief engineer, and instantly a giant of a fellow was standing at his desk. "You go with them."

Sasha gathered that Barracks No. 3 was no joke.

They left the office and set out. Timosha led the way, his arms curved, his bull-like neck thrust forward. Sasha guessed that he was an ex-sailor.

"Didn't you serve at Kronstadt?" he asked.

"I did," said Timosha in surprise. "Why, were you there too?"

"For a little while. Sent there for practice. I thought I had seen you somewhere."

Timosha smiled.

"You looked familiar to me, too."

They glanced at each other and each decided to assume that they really had met at Kronstadt.

There were at least forty beds in Barracks No. 3. Some of them were neatly made, with white sheets turned back, but the bedding of others lay all in a heap. Blue spirals of tobacco smoke curled under the low ceiling. It was impossible to breathe on first coming in from the fresh air. The room reeked of sweat, home-brew, and dirty clothes. The bang of the door sent a group of boys sitting on the floor near the stove running for their beds. Followed a moment of silence. Sasha, Timosha, and the feldsher walked down the aisle between the two rows of beds.

"Good morning," said Dr. Zelenin.

"Where's that bastard gone to, I'd like to know?" drawled somebody in a loud voice.

"Gone for smokes, I guess."

"It's taking him a goddam lot of time."

"What's this, a big specialist you've brought us, Timosha? Gonna give it to us, yeah?"

Pandemonium was let loose. Shouts, yells, whistling, cigarettes flying from bed to bed.

"Shut up!" roared Timosha. There was instant silence. "Well, guys, how're your sore throats getting on? Win a big haul, Fyodor? And you, Ibraghim?"

"Don't know nothing, I got a terrible headache," said Ibraghim, shutting his eyes.

"In a minute we'll know who's lying and who's telling the truth. Give your orders, doc."

"Why have you shut all the windows?" asked Sasha. "The air in here's enough to kill a horse." (Feeble laughter in one corner.) "Pass out the thermometers, Kuzmich."

"No sense in it," whispered the feldsher. "They force them up to the temperature they want."

"Keep your eye on them, so they can't. Comrades, I must ask you to stop smoking at once and open the windows. The grippe virus abhors fresh air."

"Virus!" scoffed Timosha. "They're just a bunch of fakers."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Sasha.

He went over to the end bed, sat down and examined the patient according to all the rules: asked him questions, made him take off his shirt, sounded his heart, his lungs, looked at his throat. Under Timosha's fierce eye the boys obediently slipped the thermometers into their armpits and were comparatively quiet. The thin dark-complexioned Ibraghim sat on the edge of his bed with the blanket drawn

up to his chin and rocked back and forth as he sang an improvised song:

*Once a set of udarniks*
*Asked me to join their team,*
*But what do I want with udarniks?*
*I'm Ibraghim the Free!*

For the last few years this man with sorrowful eyes, Ibraghim Enaleyev, had been living as if in a dream. When the amnesty of 1953 set petty criminals of his sort free, they scattered to all parts of the country. In the sheer joy of newly acquired freedom, they mingled with the crowds, saw how ordinary people lived, and wondered what they were to do with themselves. Many of them found a niche into which they fitted and began life all over again; many others had themselves sent back to prison camps before they even reached a warm climate; some, like Ibraghim, wandered from one factory to another, one construction site to another, one town to another, resisting a return to criminal life but retaining the views and habits acquired among criminals. They signed up to be sent to construction jobs and disappeared as soon as they were given the money to travel to the site. They drank vodka and pure alcohol, gambled for high stakes, and never did a stroke of work if they could help it.

"He's the ringleader," the feldsher whispered into Sasha's ear. "He and three of his friends who were

let out under the amnesty. One of them's a local boy, from Kruglogorye. Dangerous fellow, if you ask me. Take a look."

Sasha looked in the direction indicated by the feldsher and gave a start. For some time he had had a feeling that he was about to be pounced upon from behind and crushed to death. Now he understood why: two terrible unwinking grey eyes were boring straight through him. They belonged to a youth of athletic build who was lying on top of his blanket with bare arms crossed on his chest. These powerful tattooed arms with the biceps swelling under the skin reminded him of well-fed pythons. The doctor's impression was that the man did not wreak havoc at the moment only because he was sated with food. There was a leer in his eyes and on his lips. A murderer, thought Sasha with conviction, and his legs seemed to give way beneath him. He was seized with a shameful feeling of helplessness. As if hypnotised, he went over to the fellow and said:

"Give me your thermometer."

"Certainly," he replied in an unexpectedly courteous tone. Sasha noticed that he was handsome, with regular features and fair curly hair.

His temperature was normal. Sasha listened to his heart. It was working like a powerful engine. His lungs were like bellows.

"Where do you feel bad?" he asked.

"Nowhere," said the youth with a grin.

"Head? Throat? Stomach?"

"Everything's fine. My heart aches a little."

"How's that?"

"I'm in love."

Sasha caught sight of the words "We're tired" tattooed on the boy's legs. Amusing. He folded up his stethoscope and put it in his pocket. The shameful feeling had left him (where had it come from?) and again he felt sure of himself.

"Prolong my sick leave," said the youth quietly but very distinctly.

"Why should I?"

"As a favour. You and I have something in common."

"You and I?"

"Yes. We're both after the same girl—Dasha Guryanova." Suddenly he barked fiercely: "Get me, big boy?"

"You're crazy," said Sasha sharply and walked away with his chin out.

Dasha and that thug? Incredible! A good, pure girl and that.... But people must be gossiping about me. Have I given them cause?

"Well, how do you like him?" asked the feldsher.

"Who is he?"

"Fyodor Bugrov."

Sasha began examining the next patient. A moment later the door creaked and a man in mud-

caked overalls staggered into the room and collapsed on his bed. Timosha ran over and shook him by the shoulder.

"What's the matter, Victor?" he asked.

"I told him yesterday he was not to get out of bed," said the feldsher. "He's been out on the site again. He had a high fever last night."

Timosha carefully undressed him, thrust a thermometer under his arm and wrapped him in a blanket. Then he stood up, darted a look full of hatred at Ibraghim and Fyodor and said quietly and distinctly:

"You lousy bastards!"

Only four out of twelve men had fever, but all of them, with the exception of Bugrov, complained of headache, backache, and general debility.

"Flu takes the most unexpected forms," said Sasha. "It is not necessarily accompanied by fever, and for that reason I cannot say who are really sick and who are just pretending. One of you," and he looked in the direction of Fyodor, who shook an enormous fist at him, "I know, is pretending. I am speaking of Fyodor Bugrov. He has tried to intimidate me. As for the rest of you, it's a matter for your own conscience."

"Why don't they give us rubber boots?" called out Ibraghim.

One of the boys held up an ordinary laced shoe.

"Try working in water in such foot-gear, doc! Anybody'd catch cold!"

Timosha held up his hand.

"Quiet!" he thundered. "Look what Victor's done to himself, you swine, and all because he's a real Komsomol who throws his heart and soul into the job, while you—!" he gave a disgusted wave of his hand. "You'll get new boots tomorrow when the barge comes."

Ibraghim jumped up and ran over to Timosha in his underclothes.

"Swine, you say? Once a guy's been in prison he's a swine? Why is everybody so suspicious of me, doc? Make me go to meetings and grab their pockets soon as I show up."

Timosha gave a snort.

"What're you talking about? Who cares about your history? Do an honest day's work and you'll be looked on as a human being. But own up—are you really sick?"

"No, I'm not," cried Ibraghim, "and I'm going to work! To hell with the lot of you!"

He made a dash for his bed and began pulling on his clothes.

"Let's go," said Sasha, and opened the door. Involuntarily he cast a last glance at Fyodor, who again showed him a fist. And again, for a fleeting moment, Sasha was gripped by fear. Out on the

porch Timosha tossed a thin cigarette into his mouth and said between his teeth:

"We'll call a meeting and let Fyodor have it. I'll raise the question tomorrow.

"There's your modern youth for you!" sighed the feldsher.

"Modern youth!" mocked the seething Timosha. He said good-bye to Sasha, assuring him he'd have no trouble with the men in the other barracks, and jumped on the running-board of a passing truck.

Sasha and the feldsher spent several more hours examining patients, writing prescriptions, giving instructions. The worst cases were sent to the hospital. When their work was done they went back to the chief engineer's office.

"Well, how did you get on in No. 3?" asked the chief. "Find any fakers?"

"We did, of course, but—"

"I don't know what our Personnel Department was thinking about, taking on a set of ex-convicts like that Ibraghim."

"I have the impression," said Sasha diffidently, "that Ibraghim isn't a bad sort at heart. Perhaps if we could forget about his past—"

"Tried it. Couldn't wash that fellow clean with holy water."

"That's not true," put in Yegorov. "You know perfectly well it's not true, Yuri Petrovich. Often

we haven't the time or inclination to be as attentive as we ought. We forget that every person has an inner life we know nothing about."

Sasha glanced at Yegorov in surprise. The chief engineer glanced at him, too, gave a little laugh and asked Sasha if his hospital needed anything in the way of repairs or fuel.

"Don't forget you've got a rich uncle to fall back on now," he said.

At this moment loud voices were heard arguing outside the door, and presently a young man in a leather jacket burst into the room.

"Yuri Petrovich, where's that cement?" he demanded.

The chief engineer jumped up and the two stood shouting at each other for a few minutes. Sasha felt there was something familiar in the face, the figure, and the gestures of the young man in the leather jacket. The chief signed a slip of paper, the young man snatched it up, put it into his pocket, turned around, gave a whistle of astonishment, and held out his hand to Sasha.

"Well, I'll be—!" he exclaimed.

"Hello," murmured Sasha uncertainly as he took the hand.

"Don't recognise me? That's not strange. You've only seen me on the other side of a net. Remember how I stopped that fast return of yours? You lost your specs from shock."

"Boris!" cried Sasha, jumping up with pleasure. Now he recognised the young man as a member of the Building Institute volley-ball team. They embraced. In big brightly-lit gymnasiums they had faced each other on opposite sides of the net, and when the game was over they had parted as strangers. But here on the shores of this cold lake, in this small busy office, they met as members of the brotherhood of Leningrad students, of the even closer brotherhood of student sportsmen. Sasha was overwhelmed. He certainly had never expected to run into a fellow volley-ball player in this backwoods! He could hardly have been happier had he suddenly come upon Max.

"Your team wasn't bad. Especially that defence man, a hot-tempered fellow—what was his name?"

"Maximov."

"That's it. Where is he now?"

"He'll soon be setting out for foreign parts; he was assigned to the Merchant Marine. Listen, why shouldn't we keep in training here?"

"Are you crazy, doc? Where do you suggest? At the bottom of the lake?"

"We could find a place."

Boris saw Sasha out and promised to call on him soon. Sasha and Yegorov went over to the car.

"How's the building of houses getting on, Sergei Samsonovich?"

Yegorov pushed his crutch into the mud and

made a sweeping gesture with his left hand as he quoted Pushkin:

" 'And here the town shall rise, to spite our neighbour proud. . . .' "

"In this case, who is our neighbour?"

"We have one. A town not much bigger than Kruglogorye, but it puts on a lot of airs."

## YEGOROV

An early twilight descended on the lake and construction site, wiping out the line of the horizon. Occasional snow-flakes fell slowly from the grey sky. For a moment they sparkled like stars in the headlights, then settled on the road and were crushed by the wheels. Pyotr was more cautious now that evening had set in, and the car advanced slowly, like a blind man, two long yellow arms groping the way among the thin trunks of the aspens.

"Smoke, doctor?"

"I have my own, thanks."

"How did you like Crystal Promontory?"

"It put new life into me," said Sasha. "Makes you feel different when you know things are humming only a few miles from Kruglogorye."

"You're right," assented Yegorov enthusiastically. "And soon things'll be different in Kruglogorye itself. We'll cut a highway along the shore of the lake,

build houses on it and run a bus line. The town and the construction site will merge to form the single big town of Kruglogorsk."

"Why not New Moscow?" Sasha's tone was derisive, and no sooner had he said it than he was sorry.

But Yegorov only laughed. After a little pause he said, without any connection:

"Fine folks we've got here."

It was as if he had wanted to ask Sasha a question, but on second thought resolved on a statement.

"All of them?" asked Sasha.

"All that I know."

"Do you know Fyodor Bugrov? What sort of person is he?"

"Where did you meet him?"

"He's the one sure faker I found in Barracks No. 3."

"Oh, so he's still here? I thought he had set out on his wanderings again." He struck a light; then, after a little pause: "Fyodor's a bad one. He puts in an appearance about once a year. Brings big money with him. Says he earns it at honest work but I don't believe him. He's a bully and a rowdy and a drunk. Everybody groans when Fyodor comes round."

"Has he got a family here?"

"No, his mother died two years ago. But from the age of ten he lived with his grandmother in Gat-

china. His grandmother's a herb-doctor—has lots of money, the old hag. I was told by the militia they suspect her of more serious things than being a quack, but she's too clever to let herself get caught. To this day she thrives in Gatchina."

"What made him come back here?"

Yegorov glanced at Sasha out of the corner of his eye.

"First of all, he's got a house here; and secondly, he's got a girl."

"Dasha Guryanova?" asked Sasha, gulping.

"Uh-huh," nodded Yegorov, gazing intently at the driver's back. "That nurse of yours, the blonde one."

"Is she in love with him?"

Yegorov gave a disapproving grunt. That idiot of a doctor! Might think he was riding in a Leningrad taxi with a driver who didn't know him from Adam. The damn fool couldn't even keep the quaver out of his voice.

"What do you think, Pyotr?" he called to the driver. "Is Dasha in love with Fyodor Bugrov?"

The driver gave a little start. It was clear he had been following their conversation.

"Dasha?" he said with a hoarse laugh. "She's still too young—doesn't know what's what yet."

Sasha realised Yegorov had given him a friendly push away from the edge of the precipice. It was quite enough that gossips were associating his name with Dasha's. But really they had no reason to. In

the last few weeks he had grown so close to Inna that he could almost feel her presence. They telephoned to each other at least every other day, they wrote long letters and exchanged photographs. One Inna was standing on his desk: laughing eyes, a swan-like neck, a faint suggestion of collar-bones. Another Inna, smaller (three-by-six), gazed at him with wide searching eyes that went straight to his heart. Sasha had convinced himself that he was in love, that the cracked voice coming through the telephone receiver, the blue sheets of note-paper covered with fine writing, and the satin-finished photographs, added up to the girl who had put her hand on his shoulder that night and looked tenderly up into his face. In reality their letters and telephone calls were merely frantic attempts to prolong that precious evening, to capture the blue-bird that had flashed across the dance pavilion among the pines. Every night on going to bed he would look at the photographs, repeat certain phrases as fervently as an evening prayer, and fall asleep content. With Dasha Guryanova he tried to be distant and professional. Most of the time he was able to look upon her merely as one of his associates, but for some reason today's experience disturbed him. With a shudder he imagined Dasha in the arms of that handsome but loathsome brute.

"Fyodor's a son of a bitch," he heard the driver say.

"Then why do you drink his vodka?" asked Yegorov.

"Why not if he treats me? He's not bad company, knows how to give folks a good time."

"Hear that, doctor? What can you do with a guy like that? Hold up a glass of wine and he'll come running even if he looks on you as a son of a bitch. You'd probably drink with the enemy, wouldn't you, Pyotr?"

"What d'you take me for?" said the driver stiffly. His shoulders in the quilted jacket and his head with the cap perched on one ear stood out sharply against the swirling light.

"To the office or home?" he asked.

"Home." Yegorov leaned over and whispered into Sasha's ear: "I hurt his feelings; look, he's sulking like a baby. Good guy. But that, by the way, is an important question. Our men drink a lot—a habit they've inherited from their ancestors. And the funny thing is, they think vodka's good for them, better than any medicine. Sometimes I begin to wonder myself if it hasn't got some secret vitamin in it. We've got old men here who have almost reached the hundred mark and still drink vodka and go hunting."

"If they didn't drink, they'd reach the hundred-and-fifty mark," said Sasha.

"I suppose you're right. Some Komsomols came to me the other day, said they wanted to start a cam-

paign against drink. Wouldn't be a bad idea for you to lend them a hand, elucidate it from the scientific point of view, so to speak."

"Read a few lectures?"

"If you like."

The car drew up in front of a little log house on the main street. The headlights revealed intricately carved window-frames that contrasted oddly with a severely practical green-shaded office lamp throwing its light through the window. The net curtains suggested warmth, cleanliness, and hospitality. Sasha was loth to return to his own vast empty rooms at the hospital.

"Perhaps you'll come in and meet the wife?" said Yegorov with forced levity.

"I'd be glad to."

Yegorov clapped him on the back eagerly.

"Good for you! Have a decent meal for once. You must be sick to death of bread and cheese by this time."

"How did you guess?" said Sasha.

"There aren't any secrets in this place."

Yekaterina Ilyinichna, the chairman's wife, was wearing a kerchief tied round her head in peasant fashion, and a smart woollen cardigan.

"Some Kruglogorye brandy, Alexander Dmitrievich? And some smoked grelling?"

"Grayling, Katya," corrected Yegorov.

"The deuce with it! Help yourself, do. And try some of them pickles."

"Those pickles, not them pickles, Katya. She doesn't take a polish, Alexander Dmitrievich. It's her Kruglogorye upbringing." He drew her to him affectionately. She stroked his hair.

"He's got an education, like you," she said. "Sits up till three in the morning reading. I'm the ignorant one in the family." She smiled, but Sasha caught a note of bitterness in her voice. "He says the Germans have three K's for their women. *Kinder, Kirche* and *Küche.*"

"The Germans, but not us, Katya," said her husband. "You, for instance, don't spend all your time in the kitchen. Look at all the social work you do."

"There's my social work kicking up a fuss," she said with a smile, indicating the door from behind which came the sound of scuffling children. "I'd better go and see what's up."

Yegorov followed her with his eyes, heaved a sigh, and said:

"Sometimes when I'm sitting home reading of an evening, the wife knitting, the kids playing with their blocks, I suddenly seem to feel the earth give way under me and I'm seized with terror. What if all this should be blown up? No doubt others have the same feeling—others who are happy in their home life. I suppose we've seen too much suffering to forget it easily. Understand what I mean?"

"Oh, yes. Perhaps this fear for one's happiness, this expectation of the onslaught of dark and destructive forces, is locked in our genes and handed down through the ages. But our children will be freed of it."

Yegorov fingered his wineglass pensively, smiled once or twice, then laughed outright.

"The idea just struck me that if I hadn't lost a leg I probably would never have settled down to a quiet family life. I was quite a rake before the war and my big passion was dancing. And on the dance floor, you know, one's apt not to—"

"Sometimes on the dance floor. . ." began Sasha, but his voice trailed off without finishing the sentence.

Yegorov poured out two glasses of vodka.

"A drink to end drink in Kruglogorye," he said, holding up his glass.

Sasha gulped down the fiery liquid, squeezed his eyes shut, groped with his fork for a pickled mushroom, swallowed it, and reached for a cigarette. His head began to hum pleasantly, the blood throbbed in his temples, and out of a cloud of smoke a red moon-like face with slits of eyes smiled genially.

"I met you once before," said Sasha archly.

The red moon gave a jump and the glittering eyes grew round.

"Has it gone to your head?"

"I'm all right. Remember?—Palace Embankment, two swells insulting a war veteran. . . ."

"Oh!" cried Yegorov and covered his face with his hands. "So it was you?" he said in a faint voice. "I've been racking my brains to remember where I'd seen you before. I'm ashamed of that incident."

"So am I," said Sasha.

"Why should you be? I'm the one who accosted you. Believe it or not, it's the only time in my life I got out of control, and all Misha Sazonov's doing. I hadn't seen him for fourteen years and suddenly ran into him when I came out of a bookshop. Told me his troubles. He's got a smudge on his reputation and is having a hard time getting rid of it."

"What's the smudge?" asked Sasha mechanically, his interest centred on something quite different.

"He made a fine record in action at the front, but then he was taken prisoner. The Germans drove them into a birch grove and began sorting them: Jews and Communists to be shot. It was then he flinched. Buried his Party card at the foot of a birch-tree. Couldn't face the rifles. What do you think, was he a bastard or not?"

"I don't know," said Sasha slowly. "A terrible choice. Perhaps he wasn't a bastard, but he certainly wasn't a Communist. Just the usual run."

"H'm. Well, when the war was over he went back to that birch grove and spent a whole week digging."

Sasha shuddered.

"Well?" he said.

"Dug up a lot of bones and stuff—buttons, buckles, bayonets. Sort of went nuts. People treated him —you know how it was in those days—like a son of a bitch and a traitor."

Yegorov poured himself out another glass of vodka and drank it slowly. His gaze wandered past Sasha into space.

"That's the story he told me. I mean to bring him here. I've found a job for him—captain of a crew of raftsmen. He and I were studying at the Water-Ways Institute when the war broke out."

How trifling, thought Sasha, were the doubts and problems that presented themselves to him and his friends in comparison with what these forty-year-old men had gone through! They had been put individually to the test—had been snatched up in iron tongs, held in the fire, beaten on the anvil and thrust, white-hot, into cold water. And his generation? Could they stand such a test of courage and loyalty? What was he saying? His generation: Timosha, Victor—one glance was enough to convince anyone of their strength. And his own friends, the city boys with their blasé manners, lovers of jazz, sport, the latest in clothes, boys who sometimes posed, yet who would not stoop to fawn, crawl, beg favours, live at another's expense and who, abhorring high-sounding phrases, sought to preserve the purity of their own souls—were they not capable of similar feats? They were. Let Max pose as the

weary cynic; Sasha knew he could stand the test. And so could Vladka.

"Do you remember what we talked about that evening, Sergei Samsonovich?"

Yegorov made a face.

"Drunken ravings."

So he didn't remember. For him it was just a preposterous and regrettable incident, yet this incident had been one of the things that had brought Sasha to Kruglogorye.

"Wait, I do seem to remember something. I remember seeing two fellows . . . yes, I remember. The two of you looked like a couple of *stilyagi* to me, and there were certain questions I wanted cleared up. But I've forgotten what I said."

"You asked us what our gauge registered, how our course was charted."

Yegorov stared at him a moment before he burst out laughing.

"Honestly? Did I really? That was an Institute joke. I must have fallen back on it as an opening."

"I thought you were just showing off your 'culture'!"

"See how hard it is for people to understand one another?"

"But what was worrying you at the moment? Sorry if I seem to probe, but it's important to me."

"Worrying me?" Yegorov let his eyes wander about the room. "It was a queer evening from the

very outset, and queer feelings possessed me. I hadn't been in a big town for a good many years. After the war I crawled into this hole and stayed here. And then all of a sudden I find myself early one evening on Nevsky Prospekt leaning against a wall, feeling small, provincial, one-legged. The crowd went by. Whole, healthy, happy people, young folks, pretty girls, some of them on the vulgar side, and flashy young men swaggering along in groups. Music coming from the cafés. And I thought—or rather felt—I had developed a seventh sense. You're a damn fool idealist, Yegorov, old man, I said to myself. Who of all these people cares a fig about the 'big things' you're doing on the rural front? Which of these girls will reward you with a smile? You haven't seen life, never knew what it was to be young. Take a good look and tear your hair. And here my heart leaps up in fright and shouts out: 'That's a lie! Hey, you puppies, you'll never find out how cold death's fingers are; you'll never know the fierce ecstasy of storm in your soul, racking your brain and tearing the very heart out of you; you'll never know how sweet kisses are when you expect each one to be the last. Remember the song:

*Youth put us in the saddle and sent us against the foe,*
*Youth put us in battle-ships and showed us where to go.*

And where has youth put you, you pitiable tribe of pavement-polishers?' But then my brain stepped in and said: 'Enough of that, Yegorov. One might think you didn't know today's young folk, hadn't seen how they can work. True, they're gay, they stroll up and down the boulevards, they make love, but they also climb into freight cars and set out for the east as you in your day set out for the west, and they make their way through the underbrush of the taiga, and they stand unflinchingly in the heat of blast furnaces. As for the city dandies—first of all, there aren't so many of them; and secondly, how do you know what's going on inside them?'

"That, then, is the discussion my heart, brain, and seventh sense were holding when I ran into Misha. You'll have to forgive me, doctor, if I've got my anatomy mixed up."

Sasha took nervous little draws on his cigarette as he listened. So he had been right in surmising that there was some deep life experience behind the mumbled words of the tipsy good-natured cripple. Max had missed this.

"Have you found an answer to your searchings, Sergei Samsonovich?"

"Not a complete one," said Yegorov.

He twisted round on his chair to switch on the radio. Evenings like this make men friends, thought Sasha as he gazed at the back of Yegorov's big closely-cropped head. The hum of the warming

radio filled the room. Yegorov began searching for stations. There were the sounds of little explosions, the wail of a violin, the quick impatient accents of a foreign tongue, the stirring surge of a symphony orchestra. A jazz orchestra arrogantly pushed its throbbing melody into the symphony's flow and gradually crowded it out: "We should care, let come what wi-i-ll, we—should—care!" Then, in a moment's pause, the calm, confident call-signal, familiar from childhood: "Broad and wide my native land . . . broad and wide my native land."

"Do you believe in communism, Sergei Samsonovich?" asked Sasha.

Yegorov turned and looked at him a moment before saying:

"I'm a Party member."

Sasha was taken aback.

"Sorry, but that's not what I meant. It's clear to me that you accept Marxist ideas, but what I wanted to ask was whether you yourself had a clear concept of what communism means. Lots of our people are fond of shouting, 'Forward to the glittering heights!' But I'm sure there are many among us who don't really understand that they are working towards communism. What are those glittering heights? They're too abstract. It seems to me more people have begun thinking about this of late."

"I get you," said Yegorov. "It's true that some

suppose life will be a sort of idyll under communism, and others spout the word—communism, communism —without giving any consideration to what it really means. But on the whole people are becoming more exacting, more discriminating in words and deeds; they are cultivating whatever is communistic in their environment and in their own natures. After all, communism is right here, in our very midst, throbbingly alive. Perhaps I see it in too earthy an aspect, but I'm inclined to transpose the dream into terms of actual living. Once there was the village of Kruglogorye. The inhabitants went hunting and fishing, made a revolution, drove out the Whites, built a dock on the lake, a factory, new houses, introduced electric lights and radio, and the village of Kruglogorye became the small town of Kruglogorye. People worked and died and new people were born into a world lit by electricity. We are carrying on the work here and on Crystal Promontory. Soon the small town will become the big town of Kruglogorsk. Our children will be using atomic energy. And so an endless chain of progress will reach forward into the future: bright houses with enormous windows will be reflected in the warm waters of the lake, palms will wave their branches, fibre-glass cars will speed back and forth over broad white highways. Kruglogorye. See it? That's how it will be."

"I think I understand. The main thing is that endless chain. My great-grandfather was imprisoned

in Schlüsselburg Fortress for his ideas, although he had no hope of seeing the tsar overthrown in his lifetime. And that's what makes our life so exceptional. People—at least most people—are working not merely to fill their bellies."

They sat talking late into the night. Their minds were clear, their hearts pure, and each rejoiced in having found a friend.

When Sasha at last stepped out on to the porch he was struck by a strange brightness emanating from everything. Snow had fallen. The clouds that had thrown a white coverlet over the land, put white caps on chimneys and fence-posts and added an ermine collar to the rich mantle of the old church, had retreated far to the south. A full moon hung in a deep blue sky. Winter had come.

## Chapter VI

## THE PORT, A QUIET HARBOUR

In a single night late in November the harbour froze over. Dense grey fog strata, born of the sea, descended on the city. Through the fog came the hooting of horns, the wailing of sirens, the crackling of crushed ice. Powerful tugs moved out into the open harbour where caravans of freighters were being formed. The freighters followed the broken path to the harbour, cut by the tugboats. For a whole

week the frisky little quarantine launch had been drawn up on shore, making a shameful display of her battered red bottom. Doctors, customs officers, frontier guards, "Inflot" officials and agricultural inspectors, all were now taken out in tugs to meet the ships. Life became hoarse, hazy, hurried, clamped by fog and ice into the narrow framework of practical necessity. But there were factors other than meteorological ones that made recreation impossible.

On one of those wretched evenings preceding pay-day, Vladka Karpov shrugged his shoulders in despair and pinned his last ruble to the wall as a sign of complete capitulation. Then he crawled under his bed and dragged out his famous iron pot.

If the Leningrad Medical School were to open a museum, Vladka's iron pot would unquestionably be given a place of honour in it. Seven years before, a dishevelled bewildered lad had appeared in the students' dormitory carrying a huge wooden suitcase with a padlock on it, a guitar, and this iron pot. Time passed. Vladka learned the science of medicine and the latest dance steps and he had the raw edges shaved off his manners, yet at the end of every month his iron pot was sure to put in an appearance in the huge kitchen belonging to the dormitory. The boys threw into it whatever they had—a packet of dried peas, a potato, a piece of sausage, a lump of sugar, a pickle, or a leaf from a rubber plant. Anyone could

ladle himself out a dishful of what was called Vladka's "brew". The pot stood on a low fire from morning till night. Some of the boys were grateful for this means of getting a meal, some considered it too risky, most of them looked upon it as a symbol of student brotherhood.

While Vladka made his emergency soup on this particular evening, Max washed his favourite blue shirt at the tap in the washroom. He poured boiling water over it, rubbed it with gentle solicitude, rinsed it and wrung it out to the accompaniment of a popular song hummed through his nose. Suddenly he straightened up, opened wide his eyes, and recited impromptu as he gazed into the looking-glass:

*The Chinese made the shirt I wear*
*And sent it here—a long, long way;*
*I bought it in a shop one day*
*Because it suits my eyes and hair.*

The door was ajar and his voice went thundering to the end of the long corridor, which was always deep in shadow. Just then a door creaked and heavy feet came pounding over the parquet. Max turned his head and saw Pyotr Stolbov advancing importantly in a new blue suit and highly-polished tan shoes.

"Got a match, Stolb?" he asked amiably.

Stolbov pushed a lighter in the form of a pistol under his nose.

"How's life treating you?" he asked.

Max lit his cigarette and turned back to his washing.

"Rough," he said brusquely. Fancy discussing life with a fatted calf like Stolbov!

The latter, disappointed by Max's indifference to his fancy lighter, moved on to Vladka. He found him sitting next to the hot plate stirring the contents of the pot with his left hand and holding the latest copy of the magazine *Poland* in his right. With a regal gesture he motioned Pyotr to a seat. The latter plumped himself down on the edge of Max's desk and stared at Vladka, who went on reading as if Pyotr did not exist. Pyotr could not understand these two fellows, Vladka and Max, or any of the other members of their set, but there was something about them that attracted him. They could spend a whole evening singing to the accompaniment of the guitar or reciting poetry; they went out with girls, but apparently without getting anywhere. Pyotr was an admirer of law and order. He liked to see things in their proper places. He liked common sense. He liked results. He, too, could spend an hour or two talking to a girl and even reciting poetry to her ("Love is to be cherished, cherished with the years...") if he was sure the game was worth the candle. But these guys? They couldn't even keep track of their pay. Here they were reduced to dried peas again. Pyotr didn't like

that. He liked accounts, comfort, security, good food.

"How's life?" he said to Vladka.

"Life? Life is but a dream," said Vladka, heaving a sigh. He glanced at his watch and threw some potatoes into the pot.

Max appeared in the doorway.

"Soup ready, Maria?" he called out brightly.

Whoever was on duty at the student hostel had been dubbed "Maria". Vladka got up and put some plates on the table.

"I'm laying the table for two," he said to Pyotr. "After making the rounds of your estate, I doubt, sir, that you would care to partake of our humble fare."

"You're right, there. You ought to have seen the roast I got treated to in No. 4. And me and the manager put down six bottles of beer."

"All for nothing, gratis?" asked Max.

"Funny ideas you've got. Who takes money from a chief? And I'm a chief now, I'll have you know."

He laughed with delight. Never in his wildest dreams had he supposed he would fall into so soft a job as soon as he graduated.

"You're puffing up, I see," observed Max. "Just the thing. Add a neat little belly to a big guy like you and you're sure to rise to the top of the ladder in no time."

"Hold your guns," growled Pyotr.

Max was more interested in eating than in quarrelling with Pyotr. He picked up his spoon and set to work.

"How is it?" asked Vladka anxiously.

"Tastes like soup."

Vladka beamed.

"A delicate palate you've got, Max," he said.

Pyotr sat like a graven image on the desk while the boys had their meal. When it was over Venya Kapelkin, sleek-haired and clean-shaven, thrust his head in the doorway.

"Hi, fellows! May I come in?"

Kapelkin visited the "bottle" almost every evening. He called it "Cabin S and C", meaning "Sit and Chat". He told them stale jokes and the latest gossip from the port. He was working for the Education Section of the Hygiene and Quarantine Department, and doing everything in his power to patch up his ruined reputation. He was always on the go, volunteered to do odd jobs, made fervent speeches at meetings and wrote articles on labour discipline for every new edition of the wall newspaper. He had grown humble and tractable and no longer spoke of the "thirstings of his soul".

"Heard anything about your visas?" he asked.

Max shrugged his shoulders.

"Not a word. Dead silence. I suppose that means we'll have to wait till spring."

"'Wafted on the breezes of spring...'" sang Vladka. "Sound nice?"

"Caruso. Damn it all, I'm sick of hygiene as a profession, I want to go to sea."

Vladka took his guitar off the hook, tuned it and plucked the strings.

*Odessa, no longer shall I drink thy wine,*
*Nor stroll along thy pavements....*

"It's all the same to me," said Pyotr. "Life's not so bad here. What's the advantage of going to sea? Figure it out for yourself," he said, turning to Kapelkin. "Here I've got permanent registration in Leningrad, free room and board, my whole pay untouched. Why the hell should I want to break ties with civilisation?"

"Why indeed, Pyotr?" said Max caustically. "You've got your teeth in a nice gooey piece of cake; why give it up? But see you don't choke on it."

"Listen, Max," said Pyotr threateningly, "one of these days you're going to go just a little too far. As if you weren't looking for cake yourself! Who are you to talk like a goddam preacher?"

"I do *not* want a soft job!" cried Max. "I want an interesting, dangerous job."

"Dangerous!" scoffed Pyotr. "Then what you want is to set out in a frigate. Ask Kapelkin here about the dangers of life in the Merchant Marine. All you've got to do is loll in your berth; sleep and eat,

sleep and eat, that's all. It's not as if you'd gone off to the wilds to be a country doctor like your pal Sasha Zelenin." He swung off the table, went over to Max and patted him on the shoulder. "So hold your tongue, wise guy. You and me are birds of a feather. We both like cream in our coffee."

Max pushed him away viciously.

"I can't stomach you, Stolb, get me? Can't stomach you, so you'd better take yourself off while there's still time."

"Maybe we'll do a little sparring?" said Pyotr grimly.

"Suits me." Max began rolling up his sleeves.

"'And they carried him away at break of day!'" sang Vladka sorrowfully.

"To hell with you!" roared Pyotr and made for the door. Vladka sang:

*Stay, oh stay, the song is not yet over,*
*The strings of the guitar are sounding still....*

Kapelkin watched the scene as he might have watched a fight between schoolboys. When Pyotr had gone he said:

"He's a bore. Dull as ditch-water. By the way, I heard he's been having an affair with a lady in charge of a restaurant. She keeps him supplied with money and things. Like in that poem of Mayakovsky's—'The fool's paradise is paved with cream puffs'."

"An orang-outang," said Max with restored equanimity. "What can you expect of the likes of him? The only thing I mind is that he assumes everybody else is made in his own likeness. But seriously, Kapelkin, somebody else told me the other day that a ship's surgeon is looked on as little more than a free passenger. Is that true?"

"No. Of course there's not much work to do, but what of it? That's not the point. A soft job. Are you afraid of those words? Why should you be? After all, we only live once and not for long at that. Why shouldn't we want to have it soft? Only different people understand the word in different ways. For Pyotr it means one thing, for you and me something else. Going to sea—that's something, after all!" He jumped up, half-closed his eyes, snapped his fingers, and stretched. "That's the life for me! Fancy—two weeks of boredom and heaving, and then one night the horizon line grows brighter and little by little a dazzling port rises out of the sea. And when the port happens to be home? Leningrad? After spending a year God knows where? Then you appreciate what the poet meant when he said: 'The very smoke of one's homeland is sweet.' And there on the dock—flowers, smiles, friends, women.... And you the centre of attention, life a whirl of activity! And after that—once again the lulling roll of the ship, the waves, the gulls, the daily round. At first even that is pleasant."

"Haven't you ever had any big experiences?" asked Vladka.

Kapelkin gave a guffaw.

"And how! Once the second mate and I were coming out of a restaurant in Riga—"

"You would!" laughed Vladka. "I was thinking of medical experience."

"Oh. There were a few serious cases, but I've been lucky. I've always been able to turn them over to port hospitals. They're risky, you know. Damn it all!" he cried, bringing his fist down on the table. "I want to be back on board ship. I wasn't made for office work—putting in hours."

"Wasn't it your article I read a little while ago about labour discipline?" asked Max.

"Well, I've got to retrieve my reputation somehow."

Max was repelled by such insincerity—writing one thing and thinking another. And all the other things he had said! Was there so much difference between him and Stolbov? Max had quite another concept of "happy, intense, vital living". Work, of course. That was an essential element. But work he enjoyed, work that was interesting. Without any hardships? You'd like to leap straight into communism, wouldn't you, bud? Skip the dirt and drudgery of our times. If Sasha was here he'd start expounding his philosophy of our responsibility to generations past and to come. Perhaps he's right? If the Decembrists had

hesitated to lay down their lives on Senate Square the struggle for freedom would have proceeded at a slower pace in Russia and the revolution might have been postponed for dozens of years. According to Sasha, we owe it to the Decembrists to keep the ball rolling. In a word, in deference to them we ought to pledge our lives to forthcoming generations. And what about ourselves? "... We only live once and not for long at that." How odd Kapelkin's voice had sounded when he said it. As if he had caught a glimpse of the chasm nobody wants to peer into.

So there's no sense in making things difficult for ourselves during the little holiday allotted us in the eternity of non-existence. Enjoy yourself, indulge yourself, get as much pleasure out of life as you can.

These were the thoughts floating vaguely through Max's mind as he lay on his bed tapping out the rhythm of Vladka's song on the window-sill. Kapelkin was absorbed in *Poland*. Vladka was strumming on his guitar. Suddenly the guitar sprang to life as if it had been kicked.

*Sing a song to me, guitar,*
*In accents low and tender.*
*Sing to me about my love,*
*And I the song will send her.*

The telephone rang out in the hall. Max jumped up and in two leaps was out of the door.

"See how he ran for the phone?" said Vladka.

"And he's hardly ever home any more. Something's happening to Max."

"Hasn't he told you anything?" asked Kapelkin.

"He's not one to confide."

Max by this time had taken off the receiver and cupped his hand around the mouthpiece.

"May I speak to Dr. Maximov?"

No sense in her trying to disguise her voice; Vladka would recognise it as easily as I do, thought Max.

"Madame?" he said.

"Is it you, Max?" laughed Vera. "I'm phoning from the library."

"Public Library? Good. Meet you there at the main entrance in an hour."

He rushed back into the room and snatched up his shirt. It was still wet and all his other shirts were dirty.

"Lend me a shirt, Vladka."

Vladka started as if this was what he had dreaded.

"I've kept it hidden under my pillow for two weeks, Max. Wear my pull-over instead."

As if Vera didn't know Vladka's pull-over!

"I've got a clean shirt," said Kapelkin, "but it wants ironing. Shall I bring it?"

"Don't bother, I'll wear my own pull-over. But if you're in such a generous mood, Kapelkin, maybe you'll lend me that knock-out scarf of yours and fifty rubles?"

Max pulled clean socks out of his bag, removed the newspaper from the suit hanging on the wall, and at the same time tried to beat the soap to a lather in his shaving-cup.

"What," observed Vladka, "could a girl see in a muddle-headed, rattle-brained guy like him?"

Max stopped and looked at his friend. Vladka was standing in his shorts pressing his pants. The muscles of his well-shaped legs were twitching.

"You think all girls go in for Hussars like you?" he retorted.

He'd like me to tell him who the girl is, but I can't, I can't, he said to himself.

Twenty minutes later the two friends left the building. Max was wearing a handsome Norwegian scarf that Kapelkin, to his amazement, had made him a present of, saying:

"A gift from me to you. No tears, please. I've got another."

"Aren't I a knock-out?" Max asked Vladka.

"You bet!"

They broke into a run. They knew all the ins and outs of the port by this time and had learned to take short cuts. Tonight they had the good luck to jump on to a slow-moving freight train that got them to the main entrance in ten minutes. There Vladka took a trolley, Max a bus.

## AUTUMN OR SPRING?

Hunching his shoulders against the cold, Max paced up and down in front of the Public Library. The fog had lifted and pale stars, cold as snowflakes, glistened overhead. But the ornamental lamp-posts in front of the library still wore an orange nimbus round their heads and stood in a stiff semi-circle like old and ossified generals. The massive library doors were never still. The people going in and out were very different from those who frequented the student branch on the Fontanka. They were mostly dignified middle-aged men carrying heavy brief cases, quick business-like women, weary graduate students in tall fur caps. A bunch of school-teachers, said Max to himself with a little laugh as he suppressed an instinctive urge, surviving from school days, to hide his cigarette in his coat sleeve.

At last the door opened for the thirty-ninth time and Vera came out. She ran quickly up to him and thrust her manuscript-folder into his hand.

"Here, hold it. I hadn't even time to tie on a scarf."

"How long are you free tonight?"

"Till twelve if you like," she said challengingly.

"That's progress for you!" laughed Max.

They crossed the square and walked in the direction of the Fontanka. Vera was silent. Max had been somewhat taken aback by the levity of her

voice over the telephone. Her present mood was more to his taste.

This was the fourth time they had met since the day Max had decided to "make a clean breast of it". That day he had gone straight to her home and discovered that her husband was away. This had pleased, frightened, and annoyed him, and in the end he had clumsily invited her to go to a movie. All evening she had had to listen to his crude attempts at humour, flat puns, and gloomy reflections. He had not had the courage to attempt anything else. The second time he had called her up on a Sunday and they had spent an odd and interminable day together. They walked up and down the streets until they found themselves on Krestovsky Island. The trees in the Victory Park were battling with a wind from the sea. They bent under its blows like the masts of ships, bravely signalling with their last few leaves: "It's a losing battle, but we won't give in."

Mine, too, is a losing battle, but I'm afraid I'm giving in, thought Max as he glanced into Vera's sparkling eyes. She was like a very young girl, like the Vera he had known on first entering Medical School, Vera the basket-ball player—gay, vivacious, irrepressible. True, she became more serious when they climbed to the top of the stadium and found themselves in the vortex of the gale. She took Max's hand and said things she knew he could not hear

for the wind. Every word spoken that day was like the chapter-heading of a book, whetting the interest but revealing nothing. Max dared not trust his conjectures. Only once was he sure of himself. That was when they were within two blocks of Vera's house and she stopped and said:

"You mustn't come any further."

So he was not just a friend! In those words she, too, had admitted it.

On their third date they had halted in the same place. Max had taken her hand, drawn her into the vestibule of a house and, without a word, kissed her. Somebody walked past and the door of the lift slammed noisily. Vera, drooping pathetically, slipped out. With a feeling of triumph he had watched her walk away, but his triumph contained a drop of pity and even of spite. She was at his mercy, there was no doubt of it.

That had been two weeks ago. In the meantime she had answered his telephone calls coldly and refused to see him. Today she herself had called him up.

"You look terrific," she said. "Nice scarf."

"Given to me by a guy from the *Novator*. An old sea dog covered with tattooing."

"And with an ear-ring?"

"What?"

"Doesn't he wear a hoop in his ear?"

"Oh, yes, and a pistol on his hip, and he has a wooden leg. A real John Silver."

The fog had risen, and a new moon that looked freshly polished hung over the spire of the Admiralty. White statues gleamed among the tangle of trees in the Summer Garden as if ghosts of spring were hovering there. The impression was heightened by a warm breeze that suddenly blew from the Neva. The sky was such a luminous deep blue there could be no doubt that the stars were really heavenly bodies and not just spangles stitched to velvet.

"How's the work going?" he asked.

"Not badly, thanks."

"I don't even know what theme you've chosen."

"Shall I tell you?"

"No, don't."

Max leaned on the parapet and lit a cigarette. He could not throw off a feeling of unease. Funny, he used not to suffer from it. But then Vera used to be different. To his own discomfiture he began picturing to himself romantic scenes between him and Vera. There was something new in their relationship. He was wholly absorbed by the thought that beside him was a woman, dearly beloved, whom he had held in his arms and kissed.

"Max," murmured Vera with a sigh, and drew close to him.

His cigarette flew into the Fontanka. Five inches from his face he saw Vera's big glistening eyes. He began kissing them. The axis of the earth creaked and the planet swung out of its orbit. The world

veered. In the centre of the universe, in the midst of the Milky Way, rose the gigantic shadow of Two Who Were In Love. Dare to blame them! Dare to accuse them! Dare to denounce them!

They crossed the bridge over the Fontanka and walked between rows of houses. Mokhovaya Street, Gagarinskaya Street.... In the pink, blue, orange light behind hundreds of windows people moved about serenely, their lives simple and well ordered, people who had found each other at the proper time, had married and moved into these houses.

"Shall we drop into a café?"

"No."

"Afraid of being seen together?"

"I'm not afraid of anything, but I want to be alone with you."

"We have to go somewhere, let's go in here. It's empty."

They stopped in front of a tiny little shop with a glowing sign reading: "Ice-Cream. Fruit Juices." The girl at the counter was the only person they found inside. A glass show-case was filled with luxuries nobody seemed to want: liqueurs in bottles shaped like penguins, enormous boxes of chocolates decorated with pictures of knights on steeds, little china statuettes. To the left, varicoloured glass cones of fruit juices were suspended in metal racks. The one and only table—marble-topped and on clumsy iron legs—stood in the corner. On the floor under

the table sprawled an empty vodka bottle, defiantly vaunting its label.

Vera sat down at the table, pulled the kerchief off her head and languidly smoothed down her hair. There was a far-away look in her eyes as if she were slightly tipsy.

"What have you got to drink?" Max asked the girl behind the counter.

"Nothing but champagne," she replied with a wink. Max lifted his eyebrows. With an arch smile and a conspiratorial look she showed him a bottle of Moscow Special.

"If the customer's worth it, we can find something a little stronger."

Max shook his head. He took a bottle of champagne, two glasses and two servings of ice-cream, and carried them to the table. A glance at Vera filled his heart with unspeakable tenderness for this clever professor's daughter sitting opposite him, touching the vodka bottle with the toe of her slipper, unaware of the mud on the tiled floor of this cheap little ice-cream parlour.

"Champagne," he said. "Foolish?"

"Why? Not at all," she said with a smile.

They gazed into each other's eyes as they took the first sip. Just then the girl at the counter turned on the radio. Perhaps she did it to be tactful, so that the lovers could talk without fear of being overheard. Or perhaps she did it unconsciously, out

of sheer boredom. The agitating strains of a Scriabin étude flew into the room and fluttered anxiously from wall to wall. Max started. He remembered that when he had first heard it, several years before, in the Large Hall of the Philharmonic Society, he had clutched one of the columns so hard that he had left the inky imprint of a student's fingers on its chaste marble. How was it possible that sounds, which in their essence were nothing but vibrations of air, could so profoundly stir a person, take possession of him, rouse memories, suggest ideas, challenge and inspire him? And how could a human being, a creature physiologically the same as hundreds of millions of other human beings, create such magic combinations of sound? Why was it that some people composed music that made the hearts of men sensitive to the appeal of love, loyalty, and heroism, while others, with bovine indifference, raised their guns and shot down their brothers?

"I wonder who is playing—Richter or Gilels?" said Vera.

Max lifted his glass in one hand and covered Vera's hand with the other.

"Let's drink to something; let's make a toast."

"To what?"

"To... our future. I haven't, it seems, told you I love you."

"Oh, dear!" laughed Vera. "I've had my suspicions all evening, Max!"

"Didn't you know it before, Vera?"

"Unfortunately I didn't," she said sadly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because there were always those others. Especially Vladka!"

"And *they* were because you had Vicky and all those others."

"Really?"

"Really."

They looked at each other and thought of all the years in which they had met almost daily, but never as they had both longed to. Vera could not now understand how she, usually so sensitive to such things, could have failed to see that Max's rough attitude of comradeship was just a screen to conceal his deeper feelings; and he in his turn cursed himself for not having caught the message of her swift and wonderful glances. And now, when, after following such a tortuous course, they found themselves so close, so accessible, and ran breathless, overturning all obstacles, to reach each other, it seemed at times that the distance between them did not diminish, that they were running, as it were, on a treadmill.

"Here, Vera, I'll give you a surprise."

Max nervously struck a match, lit a cigarette, and began to recite in a forced and supercilious tone:

*The chop-house was filled with clatter,*
*With the smells of steak and stew,*

*But what did the clatter matter?*
*It was there I first met you.*
*A potato floated in chowder,*
*A tomato flirted with fish,*
*While my heart thumped louder and louder:*
*You gazed at me out of the dish.*
*Perhaps a café in Paris*
*Or a restaurant in Bordeaux.*
*Was where Turgenev was fated*
*First to behold Viardot.*
*I heard you order a chicken,*
*Coffee and apple tart.*
*Would you like a juicy cutlet*
*Made of this idiot's heart?*

Vera laughed, but her eyes glistened.

"I remember, you wrote that in our first year," she said. "You were very cocky in those days, I wondered what made you like that. And you're still writing? Of course it's a deep dark secret, nobody is to get wind of it. Just like you. Recite something else."

Max felt annoyed. Sheer childishness, reciting such trash. She might misunderstand and think he had been in love with her all this time, like an absurd Pierrot or a melancholy Werther. And yet he went on reciting.

They were interrupted by four laughing fellows who barged into the shop. One of them was holding

a volley-ball by the string and the others were carrying gym-bags. Instantly the shop grew noisy, crowded and unbearable. Stiff blue mackintoshes crackled, voices were turned on full blast, apricot juice descended swiftly in one of the glass cones. Vera gave a dubious smile. Max shrugged his shoulders.

"Didn't I tell you Monya's serve was no damn good?" yelled one of the boys.

Max and Vera got up. Ejaculations were hurled at them as they made for the door.

"We've frightened a pair of lovey-doves away!"

"How naughty of us!"

"The girl's not bad. I wouldn't turn down a piece like that myself!"

Vera had already stepped out into the street. Max turned back.

"Did you say that?" he asked a tall, thin, fair-haired fellow.

The boy grinned and glanced at his companions.

"What if it *was* me?"

"How would you like to have your goddam nose smashed?"

"Who'd do it? You?"

"Yes, me."

"And I was just going to sneeze at you!"

"You'd better apologise."

Two of the boys sidled up menacingly, but a third pushed the fair-haired aggressor aside and said:

"Come on, take it easy. This guy played for the Medics." Then to Max: "Don't mind Keshka, he's just a substitute. He'll apologise. Go ahead and apologise, Keshka. You've no right to pick a fight with a man who plays on a regular team."

"Have it your way," said Keshka grudgingly.

Having received satisfaction, Max went out. Vera looked at him anxiously, then burst out laughing and stroked his cheek.

"Gr-r-r, you bear! Why did you have to do that? You might have taken a beating."

"That's very doubtful," snorted Max. "Were you frightened?"

"Of course I was. One against four."

She took his arm and glanced sideways up into his face. He still looked ferocious. Long ago she had noticed that he often wore the expression of a boxer closing in on his opponent. She knew that in a clinch he would never give in. But she knew other things about him as well. She knew how trusting he was, how loyal to his friends, and with what child-like eagerness he responded to any show of kindness and goodwill. Of late he had been glum and taciturn. Perhaps she was partly to blame for it. Or perhaps it was a pose? What difference did it make? She loved him as he was. A windbag, a boor, a braggart, a grouch. Let him be all of these things. She was sick to death of the virtuous Vesehlin. He, no doubt, would have pretended not to have heard the

remark, or at the most would have said: "Look what the world's come to, Vera!" But what was she to do?—what, oh what? Leave her husband? That meant leaving her job as well. She could not go on working beside him once they had separated. But she was a woman, not one of your bluestockings. Max, you blessed old grouch with a crew-cut! What arms he had! Like leaning on steel. But it was hard —quite impossible—to imagine him as her husband. Max in the solemn refinement of her home! Delightful prospect. But the horror preceding it! Her husband moving out, packing his bags with trembling fingers, murmuring something to himself, looking about him with the eyes of a whipped dog. Heavens, Vera, why in the world have you let yourself get into such a fix? Your life was so well ordered, your father so pleased. You were enthusiastic about your work, your days were filled with intellectual pursuits. Take your arm out of that steel trap! Run away! Look, here comes a taxi. Coward! Look at his face. The boxer is worn out. Oh, darling, darling! She would go with him to the ends of the earth, live in a mud hut, belong to no one but him! And what about her graduate work? Her thesis? Her husband?

"Why do I keep thinking it's March?" asked Max.

"Because it really is March."

"So there's not to be any winter this year?"

"It's been called off," declared Vera in a voice filled with desperate resolution.

"Good-bye. See you on Sunday."

"Sunday, then."

Vera kissed him swiftly and walked away. But presently she turned and came back.

"Are you cross, Max?"

"What if I am?"

"Don't be. You ought to understand. Do you?"

"Oh, yes. Run along."

A minute later she was just a receding dark form. There was the flash of a blue coat and white kerchief as she entered the bright lights of a street corner, then she was gone. Max advanced slowly over the scarcely perceptible marks of her slippers on the pavement. Oh, yes, he understood. Everything. Nothing. Again he was alone. Incredible! She had gone to be with another. Her husband. But *he* was her husband! He, and no other. And the manner of her going! With complete composure, as if she had parted with her lover, her companion in secret sin. He was a brute! How dared he think of her in that way? It was just that she didn't want to make the break all of a sudden—for her father's sake. The old man had already suffered one heart attack. And that wasn't all. Vera's situation was very complicated. Vesehlin was not only her husband, he was her consultant in science as well. A very bright fellow, and the essence of good form. No doubt he was sitting at his desk in a dressing-gown that very moment preparing tomorrow's lecture. In comes Vera. "Where

have you been so long, my dear?" "Taking a walk with Anna. Why?" "Nothing. I was just beginning to feel anxious. It's rather late."

Max strode down the pavement swinging his arms. And then Vesehlin comes over and kisses Vera. *His*, Max's Vera!

He dashed out on to the main street and up to her house as if intent on demolishing it.

Her house. "Narrow and distorted, twisted into the landscape by a mad builder. . . ." Oh, I say, there's nothing mad about it. A typical house for this section of town. Vera's father once explained that architects had a taste for such eclecticism at the beginning of the century. A bit of Gothic, of Romanesque, even of Baroque. An amusing house, that's all. As Max stood with his head thrown back, staring up at the lighted windows, a forgotten verse came to his mind:

*Whatever the hour of night or day,*
*Whatever the season, whatever the weather,*
*Of hundreds of windows, of tens of hundreds,*
*My eye will find yours.*

How I love her! Let me suffer, miss her, be separated from her, endure pangs of jealousy. What does it matter? My love for her is the only thing that makes life worth living. I love her eyes, her hair, her lips, her body, her words, her clothes, her habits, her laughter, her mistakes, her sorrow, her

house, her street, her neighbourhood, even the militiaman who is now walking past her house for the third time—I love him too, and wish him the best of everything.

"Evening, sergeant."

"Anything wrong?"

"No. Just wishing you a good evening."

"Happen to have your passport with you?"

"Sorry, but I don't."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm just about to leap up and pluck a star out of the sky."

"Come along with me."

"Nonsense, sergeant. I'm a man in love, can't you see? Any law against gazing up at the window of the woman you love?"

The militiaman gave a deep chuckle, touched his cap, and said:

"No law against it—and no law *for* it. Well, wish you luck!"

## Chapter VII

## EVENING AT THE CLUB

"And so, summing up, we may say that alcohol has an injurious effect on all the organs of the body."

Tonight Dr. Zelenin, for the first time since his arrival in Kruglogorye, had put on a white shirt (starched in a Leningrad laundry) and a new tie

with horizontal stripes. This was on the occasion of his delivering a lecture entitled "The Devastating Effects of Alcohol on the Health" at a monthly meeting of the local club. The lecture was a failure. As a critic would have put it, the necessary contact between speaker and audience was not made. At first the audience grinned good-naturedly, then froze into an attitude of polite attention. Even Yegorov, who was sitting in the front row, had to run a hand over his face a couple of times to hide a yawn. Sasha read his notes faster and faster—the sooner he got through this disgraceful performance the better.

"It is up to all of us to enlist the support of the masses in the fight against alcoholism," Dr. Zelenin asserted with forced emphasis as his concluding statement, then wiped his flaming face with his handkerchief and said: "Any questions?"

"Don't you ever take a nip yourself, doc?" came from the audience.

There was a burst of laughter. Sasha was flustered. For some reason he took off his glasses.

"I ... er ... moderately, and ... er ... on fitting occasions," he murmured, screwing up his near-sighted eyes.

The audience roared. The laughter was not malicious; on the contrary, it expressed relief, as if people were glad the poor chap had got through with a tiresome duty and now could be himself again.

"This is a fitting occasion," called out a deep bass

voice. "Come along with us and have a glass of punch."

A lean woman who was sitting in the third row jumped up and came over to him. She was the wife of driver Filimon.

"I beg your pardon, doctor, but did you say drunks could be cured?"

"I did."

"If only you'd cure that man of mine! He's in such a state! Makes life miserable for me and the kids. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself!' I says to him. 'After all, you're a public health worker, even if it's mostly in the stables.' "

"The patient has to *want* to be cured, Anna Ivanovna. Once he does, I guarantee success."

Sasha climbed down from the platform and took a seat in the first row next to Yegorov.

"Did I make an awful fool of myself, Sergei Samsonovich? Come, don't spare my feelings."

"It was a little dry, Sasha. But that's all right—your first attempt. The second will be better. Don't take it to heart." He had a sudden inspiration that made him laugh out loud. "What you really ought to do is cure Filimon. That would have more effect than a dozen lectures."

"I can try it."

"I'm afraid nothing will come of it. He's a man of principle."

The last number on the programme was an ama-

teur performance. Dasha Guryanova gave rather feeble vocal renderings (accompanied on the accordion) of *Away We Go*, *The Guelder Rose*, and *They Say I am Not Pretty*. The last sounded rather coquettish. Everyone could see that she was very pretty in her new mauve dress made in Petrozavodsk from a pattern chosen from the latest number of the Riga fashion book.

I'll make a point of telling her to throw away that idiotic flower tonight, Sasha said to himself. It looks like a crushed fly. Can't she see how it spoils the whole picture? The dress is pretty and she is a darling.

"With that our programme comes to a close," announced the school-teacher who was in charge of the evening. "Now there will be dancing."

"That's the ticket!" roared the same bass voice.

The hall was in a hubbub. The elders made for the exit, the young people came pouring in from the corridor and smoking-room. Chairs were moved back with a dreadful clatter. Dasha, her eyes aglow, her cheeks aflame, came running up to Sasha. She seemed to feel herself queen of the ball. And why not? When one is nineteen one's fancy easily makes wooden walls recede and give way to marble ones hung with mirrors reflecting hall after hall in their glittering depths; spreads shining parquet over board floors; turns coarse materials into silk and velvet, and transforms oneself into . . . oh, into anything at all when one is

nineteen. And does it instantaneously, in the twinkling of an eye.

"You're going to stay and dance, aren't you, Dr. Zelenin?" she said.

"I really don't know," said Sasha. "I hadn't intended to. Only the youngsters are staying."

"And are you so old?"

Lord, what blue eyes she had! And how they did flash!

("It's amazing what blue eyes these northerners have. Apparently they get such rare glimpses of blue sky that they preserve the memory of it in their eyes," he had written to Max only a few days before.)

"I'll go for a smoke and make up my mind. The deuce! How's a person to push his way through this crowd?"

"Let's go backstage."

"Let's. Have a smoke, Sergei Samsonovich?"

Yegorov, who was standing next to his wife, looked at Sasha and Dasha and smiled the kind and wistful smile that came to his lips only at particularly mellow moments. Tonight he was wearing the heavy, hated artificial leg.

In his light-grey suit and with his cane in his hand, he looked like a pre-war man about town.

"No, I think we'll be going, Sasha," he said. "Shall I see you tomorrow?"

"You will."

Yekaterina Ilyinichna smiled at the young people,

took her husband's arm, and went with him to the door. Sasha's heart was wrung to see how Yegorov's face flushed and shoulders drooped under the strain of walking.

"Come, let's have a smoke, Dasha. No fire inspectors around?"

They settled themselves in semi-darkness on some crudely painted scenery representing a sunset on the river. Dasha sat beside him with her hands folded in her lap. Her attitude showed reserve, but a smile hovered about her lips. She seemed to be waiting for something.

If I was Vladka I'd kiss her, thought Sasha.

"Dasha."

"What?"

"Couldn't you call me Sasha when we're off the job?"

"I'd love to."

"Good. There's something I wanted to . . . er. . . ."

"Well?"

"Give me that flower of yours. Or would you miss it?"

She turned to him with wide incredulous eyes as she mechanically raised her hands to the flower.

"This? But it's ugly. Why should you want it?"

"If it's ugly, why do you wear it?"

"It's the fashion."

"Not any more. Nobody wears them now," said Sasha happily.

"Really?" she laughed. "Then here, take it."

The unaffected spontaneity with which she said it put both of them at their ease. He thrust the flower into his pocket and took her arm.

"Come on, let's dance."

From the platform they saw that the whole room was revolving in a waltz.

*We are one, you and I,*
*Like the soil and the rye,*
*Like the clouds and the sky....*

The music brought to Sasha's mind the student dances he had attended, the faces of his friends smiling and winking at him, the coloured streamers, the deluge of confetti. The memory did not sadden him, nor did he despise this modest Kruglogorye hall hung with charts showing the results obtained by milkmaids and pig-breeders. He did not despise it because here, too, friends smiled and winked at him. Fellows from Crystal Promontory, from the sawmill, from the dock on the lake. In the few months he had been here he had got to know most of them. Some by name, some by face, some by a rattle in the chest. And this dingy little hall? Already the foundations of the new club-house in the town of Kruglogorsk had been laid.

Dasha's hand rested on his shoulder. He took her by the waist, but at that moment the waltz ended.

"What a pity!" sighed Dasha. "I do love that waltz."

"That's all right, they'll repeat it."

Suddenly raucous laughter was heard at the entrance door. Dasha gave a start and slipped her arm into Sasha's. Her fingers shut convulsively. Fyodor Bugrov and his pals pushed their way through the crowd into the centre of the floor. Planting his feet wide apart, Fyodor cast a bleary eye around him. The tops of his high leather boots were crumpled round his ankles, a tuft of fair hair protruded from under the cap pulled low over his eyes, the muscles of his clean-shaven, youthfully rounded jaws rippled as he chewed at a cigarette pasted to his lower lip. He was wearing an expensive blue serge suit. The open zipper of his sky-blue sports shirt gave a glimpse of collar-bone and soiled under-shirt. Sasha had plenty of time to take in all these details while Fyodor stood swaying on his feet and contemplating the crowd. The music struck up, but nobody began to dance. At last Fyodor smiled and slowly made his way towards Sasha.

"Evening, doc!" he said, touching his cap with two fingers. "Haven't seen you for a long time. Not since the day you had me put down as a faker."

Sasha said nothing, realising to his horror that he again felt as helpless and afraid as a condemned man in the hands of the executioner.

"Quite the dandy, ain't you!" laughed Fyodor, flicking Sasha's tie out of his jacket; then, turning

to Dasha: "Parly voo fransay? Shall we skip through this tango, sweetie?"

"No," said Dasha, tightening her hold on Sasha's arm.

"No?" roared Fyodor and, seizing her by the shoulders, dragged her out on to the floor.

There he spread his right hand on the small of her back and clutched her arm in his left, holding it close to her body. In this position he set out with tiny little gliding steps. That was the manner in which cheap and shady characters danced on the public dance floors of Leningrad and its environs. Dasha tried to break loose, but he held her as in a vice. His enormous bent form with huge shoulders and with legs spread suggestively reminded one of a spider with a moth in its clutches.

The bewildered Sasha looked round and saw the eyes of his friends fixed on him. Victor, Pyotr Ishanin, Pyotr the truck-driver, Timosha, Boris. All of them were looking at him. In two shakes they could bounce the invaders out of the hall and restore order, but they made no move.

Because they were his friends. Because they believed in him.

Fyodor spat out his cigarette and began shouting at the top of his voice:

*Down the streets of Uruguay*
*We are strolling, you and I,*

*Parrots flutter in the trees,*
*Monkeys sit and hunt for fleas....*

"Dasha, honey, you're the only babe for me!"

Sasha pushed up his spectacles, walked with marked deliberation across the dance floor, and tapped Fyodor on the shoulder. The latter dropped his girl and whirled round.

"You'll please get out of here this instant," said Sasha. "You're drunk and don't know how to behave yourself."

Fyodor took a step towards him. Sasha involuntarily drew back....

"I won't beat you up, you bastard," Fyodor hissed through his teeth. "Why should I? You might die on me. I'll *shmaz* you."

Good God! What was this? *Shmaz.* The argot of thieves. Where was he? Could it be a bad dream? Terrified by the prospect of being utterly humiliated, Sasha recoiled. He caught a glimpse of Fyodor's spread fingers reaching for his face. In a split second, which roared like an express train through his brain, he recalled in clearest detail an incident from his childhood.

...One day during their life in evacuation in Ulyanovsk, he went to the public skating-rink. He was a thin shy child, so voluminously wrapped up in his mother's shawl that it was hard to tell whether he was a boy or a girl. In his hands he carried

a pair of children's ice-skates with turned-up toes. Suddenly a teen-ager in sheepskin jacket and on hockey-skates ground to a halt in front of him. One of those smart guys who sold cigarettes on street corners for two rubles a piece. His eyes were shoe-buttons on a flat red face and the cigarette between his teeth was like a headlight. Without a word he took Sasha's skates away from him, tweaked his nose, and skated off in fancy curves. When Sasha ran crying after him, begging him to return the beloved skates, a present from his father, the bully struck him in the face with a thin metal rod. Sasha fell down and the boy stood over him waiting for what would happen. Nothing happened. Sasha just lay on the ice rigid with fear. He dared not get up for fear of another blow from the metal rod. He dared not lift his head for fear of a kick from the hockey-skates.

"You bastard!"

Sasha's muscles tightened. Remembering what Max had taught him, he stepped aside, ducked, and struck Fyodor in the jaw with a right hook.

No one had expected it. Fyodor dropped. His powerful tattooed arms and leather-encased legs sprawled helplessly on the floor. His cap was a sad little wrinkled spot beside him. And above the vanquished foe, in the pose of an experienced boxer, stood the lanky doctor from Leningrad.

After the first gasp of surprise, Fyodor's pals

rushed to his aid, but Timosha and his friends made short work of them. The intruders were gently, and to the accompaniment of appropriate remarks, escorted to the porch. There, too, was the limp Fyodor, muttering incoherently, deposited.

Dr. Zelenin was surrounded.

Dasha rushed up to him with shining eyes. She almost threw her arms round his neck.

The familiar bass voice called out:

"A clean knock-out, even if they belong to different weight groups."

"How long you been studying boxing, doc? Look at that, fellows; never know who you're picking a fight with!"

Sasha laughed.

"An illustration to my lecture. It's not hard to knock out a drunk. His sense of equilibrium is damaged and his brain can't control his muscles."

He laughed and belittled his achievement but enjoyed a sense of triumph. The creature wrapped up in his mother's shawl had, it seemed, grown into a Man.

A Man can defend his rights and the rights of anyone else; a Man can stride proudly over the earth, can dance and sing and clap his friends on the shoulder, friends who are strong and fearless like himself.

"Come on, Dasha! It's that waltz!"

Meanwhile, out in the snowy darkness, five figures

with turned-up collars were walking single file along the deep ruts in the road. Fyodor groaned and sieved blood-stained spittle through his teeth. Suddenly he called out:

"Are we to let it go at that, guys?"

Somebody behind him let out an obscene oath. Ibraghim gave him a little push.

"Move along."

"To hell! I've had enough of this stinking hole where any lousy slob thinks he can give orders. Hear that, Ibraghim?"

"Move along, move along."

"We got to be off. To Leningrad. Got to get to work."

"Not me. I'm done with you."

"Oh, yeah? Sold out for a pair of rubber boots?"

"Move along!" cried Ibraghim, this time threateningly.

"So that's it! Next thing you know you'll be singing duets with Timosha. Bah! You can all go to.... I'll take my girl and be off. To Leningrad. To Gatchina where there's real guys."

"The doc's just waiting to hand her over to you," jeered one of the men.

There was an outburst of laughter. Fyodor was panicky for a moment: his power over these outcasts was slipping. He gritted his teeth, and when the laughter had died down, said grimly:

"I'll get him."

The icy words and the flash of a knife in a clenched fist slashed the curtain hiding his hard cold heart and brought his rebellious followers to heel.

## FILIMON TAKES TREATMENT

"Can't bear the sight of it, doc. Have a heart."

"Just sniff it."

"I'll walk a mile to steer clear of liquor from now on, you bet! Take the stuff away, doc."

"I didn't think you were so faint-hearted, Filimon. Once you've agreed to take treatment you must go through with it. Here, sniff it, drink it."

For a week now Dr. Zelenin had been treating Filimon, building up an aversion to alcohol on the basis of Pavlov's theory of conditioned reflexes. At first Filimon had laughed at the idea of his being put in the hospital, but on seeing the interest his case aroused, he puffed up with importance. When Dr. Zelenin invited him into his office after the first injection of apomorphine, it looked as if nothing was to come of his efforts. The stableman's eyes lit up at the sight of the bottle of vodka on the desk and a blissful smile spread over his face.

"What's this, doc? You treating me and not taking a drop yourself? Come, just to keep me company. Like Pavlov said, eh? Well, suit yourself."

Gently, lovingly he picked up the glass, squeezed his eyes shut, and drained the liquor in one gulp. But the apomorphine did its work.

Now as he stood in front of the doctor, rosy and respectable-looking in his clean pyjamas, he cringed before the vodka like a child presented with castor oil. Dr. Zelenin, implacable scientist, sat sternly erect behind his desk. Filimon cast a lugubrious glance at the basin on the floor waiting for the eruption testifying to his aversion to alcohol. His eyes wandered from the basin to the window. A cart with a water-barrel on it was coming up the road from the lake. On top of the barrel sat Filimon's wife with a grim look on her face. She had taken over his duties and was fulfilling them courageously.

Now that I've stopped drinking I'll start feathering the nest, he said to himself. I'll save up for a TV set and me and the wife'll get educated. We'll turn respectable, heh, heh!

Sasha's thoughts at this time were occupied with mapping out a ski-route to Crystal Promontory. A few days before his parents had sent his skis to him. At first he had laughed: as if he had time to go skiing! But now he was glad. He'd find time for it. He'd practise, become expert, even go in for slalom. He could visit distant patients on skis. According to an old habit (which he kept a dark secret) his fancy released a film strip in his mind: 1) a

steep and snowy mountainside with a tall lithe figure speeding down it, weaving in and out among the pines; a little group of Eskimos—"That's our doctor!" they say proudly to the blue-eyed girl just come from Moscow to teach them Russian. "What a brave and good man he is!" The school-teacher anxiously presses her squirrel cap to her breast as she watches the young athlete with the handsome black beard. Laughter and voices in the hut; 2) dark-skinned, half-naked girls toss garlands of flowers into the air while their young men lift bark boats to their shoulders and set out to launch them in the pounding surf. Stop. In another minute a ship from Mars is to arrive. Eskimos, flowers, and boats are ready.

... Of late Sasha had found himself day-dreaming more often than usual. The result, no doubt, of increased leisure. For some reason the number of calls had sharply declined and the waiting line in front of the doctor's office was only half as long as it had been. The book-keeper was already talking about "underfulfilment" of plan. True, the falling off of patients was largely owing to improved weather and the subsiding of the flu epidemic. But how was one to explain the drop in the number of emergency cases? When Sasha first arrived he had hardly slept a night through without a call. Accidents, difficult deliveries, heart attacks, acute appendicitis cases had showered down upon him as from

a cornucopia. Now everything was calm and peaceful at the hospital. The chronic patients strolled in the birch grove on hospital grounds. The operating-theatre was standing idle, but the nurse who assisted at operations (Dasha Guryanova) was wasting no time. Eagerly and with rare intelligence she was applying herself to laboratory work. Things, it seemed, could not be better. They were making rather complicated analyses and satisfactory X-ray pictures and the hospital routine was running smoothly. Dr. Zelenin unquestionably had reason to be proud when, on stepping out on the porch of a morning, he looked with paternal affection at the low red-brick hospital. But no sooner would he catch himself in pride than he would begin searching his mind for faults in his work and means of making further improvements. He must get a new microscope and new parts for the X-ray. And insist on being supplied with new bedding and pyjamas. He must, of course, have a shadowless lamp for the operating-theatre—or was that asking too much? At least he could not do without an electro-cardiograph apparatus.

Perhaps he should ask to be sent to Leningrad to buy these things? The idea brought a thrill of pleasure mingled with fear. He would see his folks, ride out to the port to visit his friends, attend a performance at the Theatre of Comedy (Max wrote that Akimov was doing interesting things there),

visit the Hermitage (Max wrote there was an exhibition of Polish paintings on) and the Public Library (Max wrote...). But wouldn't it be hard for him to come back to Kruglogorye after such a trip? Perhaps not. Sasha had entered deeply into the life of the community and found little time to be lonely. Max and Inna supplied him with long, detailed accounts of exhibitions, concerts, parties and contests. There was, in fact, nothing else for Inna to write to him about. They had no past in common, and as for the future—it was difficult even to talk about it, let alone write. Sasha sensed something suspicious in the epic scale on which Max described the attractions of urban life. Perhaps he was moved solely by the desire to amuse a friend languishing in the wilds, but at times Sasha felt he was unconsciously trying to prove he had been right. Just see what an intense life we live! What discussions, what excitement! And you way out there!

Sasha wrote about nothing but his work. He knew Max would laugh at him if he told him he had become a member of the managing board of the club and of the editorial board of the oral journal, that he recited poetry at amateur entertainments and intended staging a performance of *Trees Die Standing Up*, that he and Boris were getting up a volley-ball team and practising once a week in an empty warehouse that had been turned into a gymnasium, and that one could live a full life even

in the wilds if one didn't complain and didn't torture oneself with psycho-analyses. He wrote none of this to Max, but he told him all there was to tell about his medical practice. Perhaps he looked upon this as the most important point in their argument. An argument that had begun on the Palace Embankment. Sasha had been shocked by what Max had said at the time and Max's attitude could not be dismissed by asserting he had merely fallen for the fad of posing as a contemporary Childe Harold. One could not accept so simple an explanation of a person like Alexei Maximov. Argument itself was a good thing. In general it was good that people argued. Three years before, whenever Sasha had attempted to turn their talk to generalisations he had been laughed down and his efforts cut short by a proposal to go out and have a drink. But times change and we change with them. Ours is a generation that advances with eyes wide open. We look ahead and behind and straight down at the ground under our feet.

All the rest depends on the strength of our eyesight. One person's eyes give him a clear view of our destination without any aid; another person's require spectacles.

"Well, I'm off, doc," said Filimon unhappily. He was standing in the doorway with the basin in his hand, a modest symbol of the new life he was entering upon.

Sasha put on his coat and went out into the yard, into the inviting grey winter afternoon where stray snow-flakes were being driven in silent confusion. A solid, compact serenity emanated from the birch-trees with their white locks trailing about them, and from the houses, which were sunk in snow-drifts as in the languor induced by a heavy meal. The sky in the south-west where the forest formed a jagged line against the horizon was darkening, and between the clouds appeared a tenuous vein of golden light. It seemed a reminder that all was not as calm and clear as that grey afternoon. Love, for instance.

Rooted to the spot by some vague but powerful presentiment, Sasha kept staring at the golden thread a mysterious hand had stretched across the sky above the forest. It was from that direction that a horse hitched to a sledge came loping down the road bringing the mail.

## A WIRE AND A LETTER

From Moscow. From Inna. Sasha drummed on the table where they lay. He reached for a cigarette without taking his eyes off his treasure. A struggle was going on inside him. The letter had been sent a week earlier than the wire. He ought to read the letter first.

But the important news would be in the wire. He feared to guess what it might be. Then, as if plunging into a cold bath, he picked up the wire: "Arriving by Murmansk train carriage number five Inna."

That was it. The guess he had feared to make. A strange girl by the name of Inna was coming to see him. A girl he did not know. A complete stranger. The few words transmitted by Morse code and printed on this piece of paper filled him with cold dread and embarrassment. How would they meet? What would they talk about? Where would she sleep? The image of her he had woven out of letters and telephone calls dissolved into thin air. Sasha reached for the letter as if for a lifesaver.

"... I can't stand it any more. You're becoming intangible, fading in my memory. Mad or brazen, I have firmly decided to take my last exam ahead of time and come to see you. Merely to have some skiing, mind! You won't throw me out, will you?"

Bless her heart! She *was* mad. This was worse than climbing into a car beside a strange man. What was the date of the wire? Tonight the Murmansk train would stop at their station. It was a seven-hour ride in the bus to the station. He couldn't make it. He would have to call up Yegorov.

"Congratulations!" Yegorov shouted into the mouthpiece. "Don't get cold feet. Everything will

be okay. Good for her! What do you mean?—of course you can have the car."

So that was that. Sasha ran back through the yard to his quarters. Chilly, damn it all. Draughts in the dining-room. And on the whole—bare, barren, bachelor. She'll hate the rooms and be bored to death. I must buy a radio. Think I saw a rather decent Record in the shop. Must cost four or five hundred. I've got the money—got a whole thousand. Snatching up his coat and tossing on his fur cap, he rushed out of the house and down the lane between the birch-trees. There he overtook Dasha on her way home from work. Hearing running steps behind her, she stepped off the path into a snowbank. A few days before she had discarded her high country boots and taken to wearing a stylish low pair with leather trimmings. Now she found herself knee-deep in snow. Countless little needles stabbed through her nylon stockings, as if punishing her for preferring an absurd city style to good old country comfort. Before she had time to catch her breath the doctor was out of sight. And Dasha knew what was up. Very well, let him go chasing after that city girl of his, comical long-legged stork that he was! It certainly made no difference to her. She did not care. Never did and never would. And it was high time she was climbing out of the snowbank.

Sasha put his new radio set in the dining-room, tossing the antenna wire on the stove. A bottle of champagne graced the centre of the historic table. Around it, arranged with careful symmetry, stood boxes of sweets and tins of sprats.

Being a fierce champion of abstinence, Dr. Zelenin had outlawed the bottle of cognac to a dark corner behind the curtains on the window-sill. Presently he began fussing about, dusting the furniture, sweeping corners, trying to drown his fears in a whirl of activity.

Twilight was closing in. Soon the car would arrive. As he dashed through the dining-room with a broom in his hand, he noticed that the pines and birches outside the window were suffused with crimson light. They looked like trees in a stage setting. He went to the window and saw that the heavy grey clouds now covered only three-fourths of the sky and the rest was ablaze with a fleeting winter sunset. Instantly a picture flashed through his mind: a huge hundred-eyed monster called The Polar Express roaring across snowy expanses. Perhaps it was this monster which, in its onward rush, had pushed back the curtain concealing the sunset?

He put on a white shirt and blue sweater, glanced into the looking-glass and was satisfied with the reflection. Looked like a first-year graduate student. Light of heart, he crossed the room and stopped on reaching the door.

The door opened and there stood Makar Ivanovich.

"Come in, Makar Ivanovich. Anything wrong?"

The old man looked at him apologetically.

"A little boy has just come on skis from Lake Shum. It seems.... Damn it all! Why am I such a dunce? Sorry, Alexander Dmitrievich; this, of course, is hardly the time...."

"An accident?"

"The forest warden was attacked by a bear. The kid says he's lost a lot of blood and is badly mangled. I'd go myself but I'm afraid I couldn't handle the case. I'm not much of a surgeon."

He blinked as he met Sasha's eyes and the latter realised how much the confession had cost him. Perhaps the old feldsher was recalling how many times when confronted with such a situation he had pompously pronounced the sacramental phrase: "Medicine is powerless to help in this case," little realising it was he who was powerless rather than medicine.

Sasha rushed out without his coat and in three leaps had crossed the yard. He found the boy, a youngster of about twelve, sitting in the waiting-room. One of the orderlies was giving him hot tea. The boy's teeth could be heard chattering against the china cup.

"Pop's dying," he said impassively. For twelve hours he had been skiing over forest paths and coun-

try roads, somersaulting down steep slopes, eating snow to quench his thirst without halting to rest. Now he felt the indifference that comes of exhaustion.

Filimon, enormous in his great fur coat, pushed sideways through the door of the waiting-room. "I'm ready. Shall we set out, doc?"

"Are you crazy? You're still sick, man. Get back into bed at once."

Sasha took his chin in his hand, murmured something incoherent, and turned blank eyes to the feldsher.

"What's to be done, Makar Ivanovich? A sledge is no good. We'd get there too late."

"We'll have to phone Yegorov," said the feldsher.

"What can he do? Give us a car, but a car couldn't get through, could it?" he asked, turning to the boy.

"No," said the boy, "a car couldn't get through."

"Call up Yegorov anyway," insisted Makar Ivanovich.

Sasha picked up the phone.

"What are you talking about, Sasha?" said Yegorov coolly. "Have you forgotten we live in the 20th century? I'll have you there in half an hour in a helicopter."

"All joking aside. . ." began Sasha.

"I'm not joking. I'll get in touch with the airmen immediately. The flying field isn't far away."

"Do you think they'll give us a helicopter?"

"I'm sure of it. Wait, what are we to do about Inna?"

Sasha gasped. He had forgotten all about Inna. A fine thing!

What *were* they to do about her? Damn it all, things never turned out right for him.

Over the wire came an encouraging chuckle.

"That's all right, don't let it worry you. I'll go and meet her myself."

"I can't let you do that, Sergei Samsonovich."

A pause, then Yegorov said drily:

"I thought you looked on me as your friend."

"I do of course, but—"

"No buts. What's she like?—Inna, for God's sake."

"Oh, she's pretty. And she'll be carrying skis."

## THE FLIGHT

In fifteen minutes Yegorov announced that a helicopter was about to take off and would pick him up on the ice of the lake near the dock. Five minutes later Dr. Zelenin was striding down the dark main street of the town. The snow creaked under his feet. The sky was strewn with stars. Rings of many-coloured light encircled the truncated disc of the moon.

He was going to fetch Dasha. He needed someone to assist him during the operation.

Meanwhile a solemn ceremony was being enacted in Dasha's house. A matchmaking ceremony. Round the dining-room table sat Dasha's mother, Fyodor Bugrov, and two matchmakers. On the previous evening Fyodor had waited for Dasha to come out of the cinema and walked home with her. "Dasha," he said, "I've come to the end of my rope. I love you. Take pity on me. I've got lots of money. It'll all be yours. We'll set up housekeeping." "Leave me alone," said Dasha. "I don't want to have anything to do with you." That was when Fyodor seized on the wild idea of wooing her in the traditional country way. He got two matchmakers: one was Sergei Sidorovich Polyakov, his uncle on his mother's side, and the other was Lukonya, night-watchman at the warehouses down in the dock. For his own peace of mind he joined the two when they went to present his suit to Dasha's mother, although this was not according to custom. He hoped his assumed meekness and expensive suit would move her in his favour. So here they were seated about the table, talking casually of this and that before opening negotiations. Dasha's mother was displeased with the whole thing. She had no thought of giving her daughter in marriage to the disreputable Fyodor.

The easiest way out would be simply to show the three of them the door, but a deep-rooted reverence for so old and accepted a ceremony prevented her from doing so. Good or bad, they were the first to

call on such an errand. She sat stiffly, from time to time casting a stern but twinkling eye at the screen behind which Dasha was sitting and defiantly playing the gramophone at full blast. A voice, full of the longing that grips a young girl's heart on long winter evenings, sang out:

*Why, with all these lads about*
*Must I love a married man?*

Dasha dropped her head on her hand. At that moment she was convinced that she really was in love with the lean and lanky Sasha Zelenin, that life had lost all meaning for her, and that the future was bleak and without promise.

Somebody gave a loud knock at the door. Her mother hurried over and a deep voice said:

"Is Dasha home? Sorry, but it's urgent—an operation. We've got to fly to Lake Shum."

Dasha leaped out from behind the screen and stood still with her fists clenched. Sasha was standing in the doorway, his eyes fixed not on her, but on Fyodor. For a moment nobody stirred in this quiet room lit by a lamp with an orange shade. Nothing took place but a silent tracer-bullet shooting of glances. An explosion was imminent. Fyodor rose slowly out of his chair. Sasha swung the bag off his shoulder.

"I'll be with you in a second, Alexander Dmitrievich!" cried Dasha in desperation. To reach her

bedroom she darted between the door and the table, cleaving the rising wave of hatred.

Fyodor flung his chair into the corner.

"Let's go outside," said Sasha. Never under any circumstances would he retreat an inch before Fyodor Bugrov. Never, no matter what happened.

"You son of a bitch!" hissed Fyodor, and the flash of his eye indicated he was glad matters had come to this pass.

Suddenly Sergei Sidorovich fell upon him from behind.

Dasha came running out of her room in felt boots, sheepskin jacket, and fur cap. She seized Sasha's hand and said:

"Come along. Come, I tell you!"

How could he abandon the fight when his opponent was at a disadvantage?

"We're needed out there, Alexander Dmitrievich!"

Sasha turned reluctantly. Dasha followed him. As soon as they were outside she felt there was something unusual in the night sky of Kruglogorye. A low but distinct hum could be heard coming out of it.

"It's coming for us," said Sasha. "A helicopter."

Dasha gasped.

"A helicopter?"

"Yes," said Sasha with exaggerated composure. "The case is urgent."

They ran through back yards, climbed over a fence, waded through snow-drifts until they stepped out on to the ice of the lake.

All this time Fyodor had been struggling to free himself from his uncle's grasp. At last he shook him off and flung him into a corner. At the door he was confronted by Dasha's mother with a broom in her hands.

"Don't dare come near me!" she cried.

Fyodor snatched the broom away, broke it over his knee, swept the room with his eyes, and said slowly and distinctly:

"So that's that. I'm through."

He rushed out. From the porch he caught sight of two figures down on the lake. The moon gave a blue sheen to spots where the wind had driven the snow off the ice, and in this sheen the figures were standing motionless. Fyodor leaped over the fence, ran to the edge of the cliff, stopped to feel for the knife inside his boot-top, raised his head and stood thunderstruck.

Through the dark blue of the sky moved a fantastic form which he did not at first identify as a helicopter.

Sasha and Dasha had forgotten all about Fyodor by this time. Within the space of only a few minutes they found themselves in a world far removed from him, a nocturnal world where a handful of people were intent on saving the life of a fellow-

man. On every hand the ice stretched away into the dim distance.

For a moment Sasha had the impression that they were standing on white sand at the bottom of the ocean. The helicopter was now hovering above them like some grotesque deep-sea fish. Then it came down vertically until its three wheels touched the snow. A door was opened and a huge furry paw beckoned to them.

The pilot had round cheeks and the laughing dark eyes of a southerner. Had they met in other circumstances he would undoubtedly have become facetious. The smallness of the cabin made them huddle together and Sasha had to throw his arm over Dasha's shoulder. The pilot slammed the door shut. The motor roared, the helicopter rose straight up into the air. The sensation was so unexpected that Sasha shut his eyes. He recalled having experienced a similar sensation of shooting straight up into the air in childhood dreams.

Now they were moving horizontally.

"Oh, there's our house!" cried Dasha. "And somebody is standing on the edge of the cliff. Must be mother."

Dasha would undoubtedly have jumped from one place to another had there been room to do so. This was her first flight, and in a helicopter at that!

One minute she was gazing with shining eyes at

her companions, the next she was staring down at the ground beneath them, the next at the distant lights of Crystal Promontory.

"How beautiful the earth is!" she breathed in ecstasy.

It really was beautiful. The vast expanse of ice sparkling in the moonlight had wedges, semicircles, islands cut into its circumference by the encircling forest.

"What make is this machine?" Sasha shouted into the pilot's ear.

This was vital information to be communicated casually to his friends: "The other day I flew in a helicopter, model . . . model. . . ."

"МИ-1," the pilot shouted back. He pulled off his mitten, scratched his ear, pulled out a cigarette, and began studying the map.

Perhaps he was showing off the least little bit, trying to make an impression on his passengers. And he succeeded.

How remarkable human beings are, thought Sasha. Sixty years ago only the most imaginative minds foresaw the time when people would be driven through space by motors. No doubt the pilot's grandfather had rumbled along the dirt roads of the Caucasus in a wooden cart, clicked his tongue at his oxen and scratched his ear just as his grandson did. And no doubt the pilot's grandson would

scratch his ear in the same way as he looked about for a landing-place on the Moon.

The twentieth century. Here we are sitting in a steel cabin with nothing under us but space, and nobody sees anything remarkable in it. Indeed they would pooh-pooh the suggestion.

Some twenty minutes later, when Dasha's ecstasy and Sasha's excitement had subsided, the pilot said in a loud voice:

"Look. The warden's cabin."

Sasha looked down and saw a little spot of garden and the two sides of a peaked roof. He looked inquiringly at the pilot.

"Will you be able to land here?"

"Not sure. The snow's deep and all those trees. I might break my propeller. But I'll have to try it."

In newsreels Sasha had seen people climbing out of helicopters on rope ladders; the sight had always thrilled him.

"Couldn't we climb down a rope ladder?" he asked.

Now it was the pilot's turn to give him a look of inquiry.

"What about the girl?" he said.

"If he can do it, I can," said Dasha with a defiant toss of her head.

"Then here goes," said the pilot, who seemed cheered by this solution of the problem.

The helicopter hovered about sixty-five feet above the earth. The tops of the firs appeared to be within touch of one's hand. The pilot opened the door. Dense frosty air hit them in the face. The pilot got down on his knees, felt for the rope ladder, and tossed it overboard. Trying not to look down, Sasha tied the strings of his fur cap and held out his hand to the pilot.

"So long and many thanks," he said.

"For nothing. Wish you luck."

It's less terrifying than I expected, said Sasha to himself, as he swung in the air, groping with one foot.

The last rung of the ladder flapped about seventeen feet above the ground. He let go and found himself buried to the chest in snow.

The forest was filled with the din of the motor, the whistle of the propeller. Sasha looked up. Dasha was climbing swiftly down the rope ladder. She almost landed on Sasha's head. Both of them laughed as they struggled in the snow. A marvellous adventure. Max would have been green with envy.

"We'll have to dig our way to the cabin," said Sasha.

"Look, there's the warden's wife," said Dasha.

He looked up to see a woman furiously shovelling her way towards them.

"That's all for the present," said Dr. Zelenin as he put in the last stitch. "In the morning we'll take him to the hospital and give him further treatment."

"Is my man going to pull through?" came weakly from a woman sitting in the corner.

Sasha started and looked in her direction. There was something primitive, almost elemental in the fear that looked out of her eyes. Apparently even in this age of helicopters and penicillin women were possessed of the primordial fear of losing their men, their providers, commanders of that little unit, the human family. Irrespective of whether the men are bank clerks, football umpires, or forest wardens. Sasha looked at the woman and said nothing.

She came up to the table on which her husband was lying.

"He's going to pull through," said Dasha reassuringly.

They carried his limp body from the table to his bed in the next room.

His wife then set about preparing supper. She fried a huge panful of meat, brought out a bottle of berry wine and a tin of stewed fruit. Dasha and Sasha found they were starved.

They ate and conducted themselves in the manner of people who are satisfied with the job done, the

day spent, and each other's company. With their mouths full they exchanged laughing glances and reminded each other of how they had been buried in snow when they jumped out of the helicopter. The warden's wife sat with her chin in her hand watching them.

"A pretty pair. May you be happy," she said suddenly.

Dasha looked at Sasha and blushed. It took him a minute to grasp the full significance of the woman's words. Seeing their embarrassment she, too, became embarrassed.

"How do you like bear meat?" she hurried to ask.

Sasha choked.

"What?" he cried. "This? Could it be the same... ?" He laughed uncomfortably at what he considered a weird attempt at humour.

"The same," said the woman with a sigh. "Victor Petrovich finished it off with his knife."

When supper was over Sasha sat down on the sofa, lit a cigarette and watched the excited hens walking up and down in their long coop. He was in a genial mood. The simplicity and clarity of everything filled him with delight.

Good work, good food, good weariness, and a good cigarette.

Dasha came in.

"I've given him a camphor injection, Alexander Dmitrievich," she said. "Now I'm going to bed."

"Dasha," he said.

"What?"

She stood in front of him all flushed and fluffy, her golden plait hanging over one shoulder. It was so thick it reminded him of those plaited loaves of bread. In the dim light of the kerosene lamp she looked to be no more than a child.

"Sit here with me a little," he said.

She sat down beside him on the sofa. How simple life was, and full of what delights! Flying in helicopters, performing operations, drinking wine, admiring pretty girls. Kissing pretty girls. Dasha got up and frowned at him. Turned and went out.

Sasha went over to the window. The snow was gleaming. So was the sky. The forest—ah, the forest was darkness, the forest was gloom. And there was forest all around. Through the forest roamed bears, wolves, men with guns. Men who struggled with wild beasts. And either the men or the beasts were devoured. From out of the sky came the throbbing of a helicopter motor. Men rushing to the aid of their fellow-men. Doctors and nurses. Good friends who understood one another.

This was a night of intense living. A night never to be forgotten.

Such nights live on in the memory, lighting up the past like lanterns.

He was sleepy.

## Chapter VIII
## KEEP ON GOING

With the closing of navigation new paths were laid—footpaths over the ice—hypotenuses which, as everyone knows, are shorter than the sum of two sides. To cross these paths on a sunny day was joy tinged with fear. Nothing could be so dazzling. Dazzling snow, dazzling sun, dazzling blue sky. Suddenly you step on to a spot swept clean by the wind. Your foot slips, and underneath the glass-like floor you glimpse the horror of yawning depths. Your foot slips, you suppress your fear, you rejoice that you are here on top, in the dazzling sunlit world around you, that you feel an urge to sing, that every new day of winter brings spring closer. But on bad nights, blinded by snow and wind, you fancy that all the demons from the bottom of the sea have slipped out of hiding among the seaweed and are shrieking at you from unseen chinks, ready to pounce upon you at your first misstep. You marvel at the darkness, the emptiness of the docks. The dim outlines of immobile cranes bring a feeling of loneliness such as mammoth reptiles must have suffered during the ice-age. Why should you press on, slipping and swaying? Why should you pursue your dream? Why should you fight down your misery? Does anything exist but you and the storm? Are there really friends, cheerful lighted windows, telephones bringing you the voice of your beloved,

your beloved herself? Are there really restaurants, ships, libraries and operating-theatres, books and films, wine, volley-balls, TV sets, songs, spring, happiness? No, there is nothing but the freezing snow, the shrieking wind, and your misery. Why are you pressing forward? Animals whimper, curl into a ball as a feeble means of protection, and prepare to die. But you press forward because you are a human being, because the storm cannot rob you of your belief that the things listed *do* exist, because you know that the sun is sure to come out again. It makes no difference how long you make your way over the ice—half an hour or thirty days. And it makes no difference where you are going—to meet your beloved or to reach the South Pole. The important thing is that you keep on going. In sun and storm. Day and night. Hopeful and despairing. On and on.

The day's work was in full swing at headquarters. Typewriters were clicking, telephones ringing, voices talking and laughing. Vladka was standing out in the hall smoking. Max came up to him.

"Well, what's new?"

"Nothing. I called in at the office. They won't let me work in the clinic. Say I must go on studying the hygiene programme. 'You'll be glad of it when you're on board ship, Dr. Karpov!' "

With the closing of navigation Dr. Maximov had been transferred to the Communal Services Depart-

ment and Dr. Karpov to the Industrial Department. That put an end to sleepless nights, Jacob's ladders, and sea lore. Life grew boring. They heard that young doctors were expected to master the work of all the departments before they were allowed to put to sea. That was no joke. It was very depressing.

A door opened and Dr. Dumpfer, a tall lean old man in naval uniform, stepped out.

"Mind helping me, Dr. Maximov?" he said.

Max threw away his cigarette and followed Dumpfer into his office. The senior doctor, it turned out, was in the midst of drawing up his annual report. Two desks pushed together were covered with papers, forms, charts and reference books.

"I'm no good at this sort of thing," said Max.

"You'll catch on quickly. You've got a good head on your shoulders," laughed the old man.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"First of all count the cockroaches."

"That is. . .?" said Max.

"You remember filling in that question about vermin when you examined ships? Here's a folder of questionnaires, there's a list of ships. Look through them and mark down the results: if vermin were found, mark it with a plus, if they were not—"

"With a minus."

"Exactly. I told you you had a good head on your shoulders."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Pluses and minuses, thought Max. Wonderful! So that's why I was taught physiology, biochemistry, dialectical materialism, Pavlov's theory of the higher nervous system. To count cockroaches. Marvellous! Well, here goes: steamship *Zeya*—plus; tugboat *Kamenshchik*—minus; tanker *Veter*—minus; steamship *Stavropol*—plus. . . .

"How's it going?" asked Dumpfer without lifting his eyes from his work.

"First rate," called out Max. Everything inside him was seething, though he presented a calm exterior.

Damn it all, you old weasel, did it ever enter your head that I am capable of reading analyses and X-ray pictures, that I have already performed three appendectomies and once assisted at a resection of the stomach? Do you know that Professor Gushchin found I had a gift for clinical work? And could you possibly imagine that I am moved by music and poetry, that I even have been known to write poetry myself? Even if you did know, it wouldn't stop you making me count cockroaches, I don't doubt that for a moment! What do you know of life? Of surgery? Nothing but these papers and those chopping-blocks.

"I'm afraid the work isn't to your taste," said Dr. Dumpfer unexpectedly.

"I happen to be a doctor," replied Max with a heroic effort to suppress his fury. He suddenly re-

membered he had felt exactly the same way when their volley-ball coach had once asked him to play on the second team.

"Ah, yes," murmured Dumpfer, going back to his papers. In a few minutes he asked: "Are you familiar with the tasks of the Quarantine Service?"

"To preserve cleanliness, exterminate rodents, insects, and first mates," recited Max. "Am I right?"

"The task of the Quarantine Service is to guard the sanitation boundaries of the Soviet Union," said Dr. Dumpfer with solemn exactitude. "We are frontier guards. Do you understand what that means? Nothing is too trifling for our attention. One rat infected with bubonic plague can bring more disaster to our people than a hundred spies."

"And what is the equation of cockroaches to spies?" asked Max sarcastically.

Dumpfer gave a forced little laugh, the sort one accords a stale joke.

"Oh, I understand," Max hastened to put in. "Of course it's of tremendous importance, the Quarantine Service. I've come to like it enormously, but—"

"You've come to like riding about the harbour in a launch and risking your life by leaping for a Jacob's ladder."

"How did you find out about that?"

"But you don't like doing the drudgery. Then what made you apply for work in the Merchant Marine?"

"I hope once I'm on board ship I won't have to write down pluses and minuses."

"Oh, you do, do you? Well, let me tell you that once you're on board ship, you'll have to go chasing after those cockroaches yourself. I'm afraid you've got the wrong idea of what a ship's doctor's duties are. There are those, I know, who look upon this job as a mere *partie de plaisir*. Such people usually come to a bad end. Once we're at sea we ship's surgeons are completely responsible for the life and health of fifty or sixty men engaged in hard physical labour, far away from their families and native land. Does that simple fact make any impression on you? For this and this alone our fellow-countrymen send us to work in this field. Foreign trading vessels of the same category don't have ship's surgeons. The health of their sailors? Prophylactic measures? Piffle! If a sailor falls ill there are a dozen others waiting in the nearest port to take his place. Don't think I'm just making this up. I've been sailing the seas for eighteen years and I know what's happening on this globe of ours."

He lit a cigarette and gazed out of the window as if trying to get a clear view of something there. This was the first time Max had heard him pronounce so many words at once. At present Dumpfer seemed to be debating with himself whether it was worth while going on with what he had begun or not. In the end he looked straight at Max and said:

"A person has got to understand one simple thing: his purpose in life, his use in society. Only then will he have the right attitude towards his work. Only then can he live a full life. Let me explain. Mankind is divided into two groups: those for whom a day of life is a full day, without deductions; and those for whom six or eight hours are deducted for work. Such people begin to live only when they check out. Add to this the hours spent in sleeping, and what is left? And we only live once, don't forget, and life's very short. Young people are inclined to forget this."

"Young people are *not* inclined to forget this," said Max. "They know very well that life is short."

Could Dumpfer have called him in with the express purpose of having a heart-to-heart talk? It looked that way. Very well, they'd have it.

"It seems to me," he said, "it isn't the length of life that matters so much as its intensity. A sprinter expends as much energy on a 100-metre dash as another runner on a long distance. And if a person drags out an existence at some boring job—"

"There are no boring jobs," interrupted Dumpfer. "There are only boring, or incapable, or unenlightened people. If you look deeper, understand your purpose, get a glimpse of the entire length of the chain, you will find meaning in whatever work you have to do. All of us are linked together and we are all doing a single job."

"Give me a cigarette," said Max. He had lost all inhibitions and seemed to have forgotten Dumpfer's seniority. When he had lit up he gave a little snort, as he did when arguing with Sasha Zelenin or one of the other boys. "It all sounds very simple the way you put it. Understand that you are only one link in a chain and you will find joy in your work. But the fact is that most people haven't found themselves. It's a hard thing to do; you can consider yourself damn lucky if you happen to set right out on the one and only path for you. Here's a poor devil of a clerk nosing like a mouse among his papers, counting the days till pay-day when he can buy himself a new suit. And who knows?—he might have been composing symphonies now if he had been taught music as a child. That's how people come to work just for their bellies' sakes. They only enjoy themselves in their leisure time. Is life nothing but work? It would be sheer nonsense to say so. There are lots of other fine things: music, poetry, wine, sports, clothes, automobiles. . . ."

"All of which are created by work," put in Dumpfer impassively.

". . . mountains, lakes, sunsets, women," went on Max.

"None of which can be appreciated by loafers. That is my firm conviction. Loafers only imagine they are enjoying life; in the end they are sure to find themselves staring into nothingness."

"And who can escape that?" cried Max. "When

the end comes a man can't help thinking: and this is all. What was it for? What have I accomplished? We philosophise, struggle for advanced ideas, chatter about working for the common good, build up fine theories, and in the end return to the soil to decompose into chemical elements just like animals and plants that don't build up any theories. It's all a great big tragi-comedy and nothing more. The common people are fond of saying: 'We'll all be *there* some day.' And so we will. All of us: the good and the bad, the hard workers and the loafers alike. And where is that *there*? There is no *there*. Darkness. Not even darkness —darkness, too, is something. So how do you expect me to give a damn about anything when I know that at any moment I may pass out *for ever?*"

"Shut up!" shouted Dumpfer, bringing his fist down on the desk. "You cry-baby! You whining pup!"

He jumped up and went to the window, where he stood with his back to Max, crushing something between his fingers. When he turned round Max was stunned by the expression in his eyes, which had grown enormous.

"Sorry. I'm an old man. Got a bad heart. I'm doing just what you suggested: looking backwards. What have I accomplished in life? I was with the troops that stormed Kronstadt. I have worked on sea and on land. *And I am not afraid!* Do you understand that? My life has been spent working for my children, and for you, and for your children. That's

our salvation. Imagine what would happen if the whole of mankind got into the panic you've allowed yourself to get into. Debauchery, unbridled animal instincts, drunkenness, degeneration. I know, Dr. Maximov, what hard moments a person lives through, especially when he's young, but a man would cease to be a man if. . . ."

Just then the door flew open and Vladka stood there with beaming face.

"So here you are!" he cried. "Go and get your pay, and make it fast. Have you forgotten we're playing the Shipbuilders at four?"

"Did you bring my gym shoes?" asked Max as he rushed to meet his friend.

Ten minutes later Dumpfer glanced out of the window and saw them dashing down the street like fire horses.

So that's the end of our philosophising, the old man thought. That's youth for you. Show them a volley-ball and everything else is forgotten.

But Dumpfer was mistaken. Max had forgotten nothing. The talk with the old doctor had come as a great surprise, touching, as it did, on questions that had been torturing him of late. Outwardly nothing had changed in his life. He and Vladka roamed through the empty port as usual, went out into the hall to smoke and make ironic comments on their surroundings, played volley-ball, went to the Public Library, to movies and dances, slept little, ate little,

argued about architecture, jazz, the Olympic games, operations on the heart, ships, rockets, women, and whose muscles were harder. But whenever Max found himself alone some dreadful creature lifted its head inside him and began to howl. It was this he had, to his own surprise, confessed to Dumpfer. It may be ridiculous for a modern young man to find himself a prey to *Weltschmerz*, but what is to be done if that is the case? Laugh at him? That can hardly do him any good. Max sought the reason for his mood. Perhaps it was the sight of the port, so recently seething with activity, now under the spell of the ice blockade. Perhaps it was the estrangement with Vera that had taken place recently. He was infuriated by Vera's behaviour. She was a coward, she was bourgeois, she was afraid of sacrificing her peace and comfort. "No doubt you've got what you wanted," he had said to her bitingly. "It's so chic to be involved in a triangle." Vera suffered, wept, lost some of her prettiness. Her life was no longer calm and secure. For two weeks they had not seen each other.

Another reason may have been the letters he received from Sasha, full of optimism and detailed descriptions of "his working day", behind which Max felt he was saying: This, then, is how *we* earn our daily bread. And you? Still going to exhibitions and dreaming of the sea?

But the main reason, no doubt, was his own "working day" which consisted mostly of going out

into the hall for a smoke that made his throat feel scratchy. In a word, he was in the doldrums. He tossed as he lay in his bed looking up into the black winter sky with so few stars in it.

He felt a little better after his talk with Dumpfer, even though neither of them had completely unburdened his heart. He began to long for the coming of spring, when the days would be warm, bright flags would fly upon the masts in the harbour, he would board a ship, and on the day of his departure Vera would come to see him off and all would be made clear at last. He would know where he stood. After all, the path over the ice through the storm must come to an end some time.

## WAREHOUSE VERMIN

Drs. Maximov and Karpov went to talk things over with the head doctor of their department. The head doctor was a terrifyingly energetic, dazzlingly efficient woman who always found time to be solicitous about her subordinates. For some reason she always referred to young doctors as "my poor boys".

"Well, what can I do for you, my poor boys?" she said.

Vladka instantly began to complain and beg to be sent to even a third-rate surgical clinic. Max waited for a convenient moment to put in diffidently:

"Irina Pavlovna, you haven't by any chance heard when we are to be assigned to a ship?"

"Not before spring, boys. But as soon as navigation begins you'll be given first choice. I'll see to it myself."

"I'll have forgotten everything they taught me by then," wailed Vladka.

"Stop it, Vladka," snapped Max. "Our chiefs know best what's good for us. They'll provide for us when the right time comes."

"Oh, what a nasty bite you've got, young man," said the head doctor with a smile.

The interview ended with both of them being transferred again, Max to Food Supply, Vladka to Communal Services. Max took over his new duties the next day. Lydia Apollonovna, head of the Section, immediately put him to work examining documents.

"Take this folder and acquaint yourself with the work of Dr. Stolbov. He seems to have mastered the job quickly and thoroughly."

Affidavits, certificates testifying to violations of sanitation rules, laboratory analyses, calory calculations. . . . Oh-h-h-h! Oh-h-h-h! Oh-h-h-h!

"Turned you into a clerk too, Max?" asked Vladka.

"Behold the labours of our brilliant class-mate Stolbov! He's the model I'm to copy."

The pages were covered with Stolbov's Gothic script. It was a report drawn up after an inspection

of one of the warehouses. It seems a shipment of high-quality flour intended for a ship sailing to distant ports had become infested with a warehouse mite. The report demanded that the flour be destroyed immediately and an affidavit confirming its destruction be submitted to the Section. That's efficiency for you!

"Is the mite harmful, Lydia Apollonovna?"

"What mite?"

"The one mentioned in Stolbov's report."

Lydia Apollonovna picked up the report and shrugged her shoulders.

"Strange, this is the first I've heard of it. Or perhaps I've forgotten? H'm. Dr. Stolbov happens to be away and so I'll have to ask you to go to the warehouse and verify the carrying out of the order. The mite is very harmful—causes intestinal disorders. Read up on it. A paper has been written by Professor. . . ."

Max went out and made for the gates of the port. The weather was warm and bright.

A balmy breeze came from the bay. The snow seemed about to melt. People thronged the little square in front of the main entrance. Outside the Personnel Office stood a colourful group of reserve seamen. Max loitered among them a little, nodding to acquaintances. These men seemed to know everything, especially about the affairs of the Personnel Office. When Max joined them they were listening eagerly to what cook Eddy Sarakhan had to say about the latest

radiograms. They spoke of pals at sea, and passed judgement on ships.

Lorry wheels had reduced the snow to slush on the other side of the gates. Max hailed a car. Fifteen minutes of jouncing brought him to the end of the Western Dam, where he climbed down on to the ice, crossed the harbour, climbed up on a brick mole, walked the entire length of it, found himself at the other end of the port, jumped on a trolley-car and rode until he came to an open space on the edge of a marsh. The warehouse was at the end of the earth.

He was aware of an odour of dampness as he entered the big, vaulted, hollow-sounding building. A little man in a blue smock was walking among the sacks and crates. He cast a swift glance at Max, then threw back his head and moved his lips as if making mental calculations.

"Are you in charge here?" asked Max.

"Uh-huh," grunted the man. "What do you want?"

"I'm from the Hygiene and Quarantine Department."

The man instantly turned round and hurried over to him with a broad smile on his face.

"Glad to see you, glad to see you. Yarchuk's my name."

All aflutter with a desire to please, he led Max to his office, where he sat him in an armchair and took a seat opposite.

"Most of my dealings have been with Lydia Apollonovna and Dr. Stolbov," he said quickly, keeping admiring eyes glued to Max's face. "An extremely talented young man, Stolbov. And so now it's you, Dr. Maximov, who is to work with us poor sinners, eh? Glad to hear it. The more contact we have with ... er ... men of an intellectual turn ... heh, heh! ... the better. Science in our age...." He paused for a moment and his eyes grew filmy as he contemplated the wonders of science. "Science in our age.... Ah, doctor, what an age we live in!" Again he was speechless with ecstasy.

Max put on an implacable face. He sensed that the man was apprehensive. From time to time Yarchuk allowed a sharp glance of appraisal to pierce the smoke-screen of his senseless chatter. Suddenly he broke off in the middle of a sentence and the two men sat staring at each other. Not a sound broke the silence. Then Yarchuk shifted in his seat, opened a drawer of the desk, took out a pack of expensive gold-tipped cigarettes and pushed it towards Max, who merely grunted and opened his own pack of Auroras.

"Is there anything you're particularly interested in?" asked Yarchuk casually.

"The shipment of flour that we found to be infested," said Max without taking his eyes off him. Yarchuk's pointed face beamed like an Easter egg.

"The order's been carried out."

"Show me the affidavit."

As he read it Max felt beaten. For some reason he sensed trickery, but how was he to get to the bottom of things through this maze of trade terminology? Everything looked *bona fide*. The affidavit was typewritten and ended in three signatures. All three indecipherable. Why the hell should people reduce their names to idiotic scrawls?

"One of them is the signature of your colleague," said Yarchuk.

Max caught a mocking note in his voice. He reached for the report again. What, this? He knew Stolbov's signature only too well: a beautiful Gothic scroll. This looked like a tangle of thread.

"Show me your consignment slips for the past month," Max said suddenly, prompted by intuition.

Yarchuk was instantly on the alert.

"Why, doctor?"

Max felt firm ground under his feet.

"I haven't got them here," went on Yarchuk. "The book-keeper has them and he's gone to Headquarters."

"Come," said Max with a smile, still obeying the voice of intuition, "you can't make me believe that. They're right here in your desk."

"So Lydia Apollonovna's been instructing you?" said Yarchuk, his voice gone suddenly soft and hostile.

"She has."

"Very well, here you are, my vigilant friend. But aren't you ashamed, a man with a Soviet education, to be so distrustful of honest folk who work—"

"Shut up!" barked Max.

He was shown consignment slips for sugar, canned food, Atlantic and Pacific herring, dried fruit, frozen mutton, flour. Again he was in a quandary. You're getting yourself into a fix, Max, he said to himself. Then the idea came to him that he ought to check the date on the affidavit with the dates on the consignment slips. When he did so he found that a shipment of high-quality flour had been sent to the *Navator*.

"So it's on the *Novator?*"

"It's not the same flour," squealed Yarchuk. "We destroyed that flour and got a new shipment in its place. You're still a greenhorn, you don't understand such things. Look," and he dumped a heap of papers in front of Max and rattled off a stream of the abracadabra of trade.

Max really did not understand, but he sensed he had hit the nail on the head.

"That's all right, we'll clear things up," he murmured. "We'll radio to the *Novator* and the doctor on board will examine the flour."

Yarchuk caught up with him as he was going out of the warehouse door.

"Listen, Dr. Maximov," he said, taking his arm, "take the advice of an older comrade and drop this

business. Don't try to be a Sherlock Holmes. You'll only get yourself in trouble."

"Don't you worry about me," said Max, freeing his arm.

"What a strange way you have of looking at things. Not *our* way. Soviet people ought to be considerate of each other, especially us older fellows of you youngsters. But if you don't want to trust me, I'll tell you something else." Here he raised his voice. "I won't have you spoiling my good name and the reputation I've built up by years of hard work."

Max opened the door without replying, but Yarchuk seized him by the elbow again.

"Your friend Stolbov was always willing to cooperate and I'm sure you will too."

With a scarcely perceptible movement he touched Max's pocket. Max thrust his hand inside and his fingers closed over a thick smooth package. Without so much as looking at it, he threw it down on the cement floor.

"I'll smash your goddam face for you!" he roared.

Yarchuk leaped aside as if on springs, snatched up the money and said, choking with fury:

"We're alone, you've got no proof of this, you puppy, and nobody'll take your word for it. If you try to make trouble for me you'll come to grief. The only glimpse of the sea you'll get will be in your dreams. Remember that."

Max went back to the office, sat down at the desk

and gave himself up to his thoughts. A shady business. The panic Yarchuk was seized by and his attempt to bribe the doctor were definite proof that Max was on the right track. True, the technique of the deal was probably more complicated than Max supposed, but he would leave the unravelling of it to the proper authorities. He must wait for Lydia Apollonovna and give her a full account. What about Stolbov? It wasn't his signature, there could be no doubt about that, but he seemed to be in the know. Could the bastard really have taken a bribe? Yarchuk was a dangerous customer. What was that odd threat he had made? Could he possibly pull strings to prevent Max's going to sea? Max had better talk the matter over with his friends before setting the ball rolling. Perhaps the best thing to do would be to wash his hands of the whole affair. What you don't know can't hurt you.

Back at Headquarters he found the offices empty; the only sign of life was the steady click of typewriters coming from the book-keeping department. He opened the book in which absent employees noted where they were to be found. As he supposed, they were out on various jobs. Lydia Apollonovna was at Baltic Fleet Headquarters, Vladka was at Coast Guard Post No. 607. And where was Kapelkin? He was the guy to talk to. He was the one who could give him the right advice. Under "Dr. Kapelkin" Max found a hasty scribble: "10:06—gone to the

Nevsky Prospekt for placards." Max could not restrain a smile as he imagined Kapelkin, impelled by a sudden interest in social activities, darting among the crowd on the Nevsky. Max would certainly consult him before he took any step in the matter.

In half an hour Kapelkin put in an appearance—very pink-and-white and frowning importantly. Seeing that Max was the only one in the office, he tossed a bundle of posters into the corner and went into ecstasies over the pretty girls he had seen strolling along the Nevsky Prospekt. Max pushed him into a corner, sat on the edge of the desk and told him about Yarchuk, the flour, and the report written by Stolbov.

"You're a wise old harbour rat, Venya; tell me what to do."

"I've heard about that guy," said Kapelkin slowly. "He's got sharp claws. You'd better keep out of his way."

"I'm not easily scared, you know," observed Max.

"We're all heroic," snorted Kapelkin, "but that's my advice. He'll spoil your chances of going to sea. He's got all sorts of connections. He's a demagogue, a snake, and a lickspittle, but there are those who trust him."

"For the time being."

"Perhaps, but in the meantime he can paint your face so black you wouldn't recognise it yourself. You've got no proof and you can be sure he'll cover his

traces so thoroughly that even a bloodhound couldn't sniff him out."

"He can't do anything about the *Novator*. It's in the Indian Ocean."

"Why are you so sure the flour was consigned to the *Novator?* It may have been sent to another ship, or even distributed throughout the city. Why should you spoil things for yourself, risk your future for the sake of a gamble like this? The bug's not lethal—sends the boys running to the privy, that's all."

"And the next time he'll load something that's really poison?"

"You can do as you please, but if I was in your place I'd drop the whole thing."

"You! You'd drop it of course," sneered Max, but his tone lacked conviction.

As a matter of fact, what real harm could come to the boys on the *Novator?* They were so tough they could eat the furniture if they had to, and be none the worse for it. Whereas he would be risking everything, sacrificing the dream he had been cherishing all these months. Yarchuk was a sly old fox and Max had no proof of anything. So a person was to surrender to the Yarchuks? Go on living beside them? Take them along into communism? A demagogue. Kapelkin had been right when he said that. How glibly Yarchuk had mouthed phrases like "we Soviet people" and "the times we live in".

That was what made such creatures dangerous.

He'd whisper "That fellow's not loyal" into the ear of somebody at the top and that would settle things for Max.

He recalled the argument he had had with Sasha about high-sounding phrases. Now he took a different view of the matter. Fine words have value when spoken by Communists of Dumpfer's stamp, or by a fellow like Sasha Zelenin, or by the millions of honest folk. But rascals who use fine words as a smoke-screen ought to be wiped out. *Can* they be wiped out? Are they vulnerable?

Kapelkin was not offended by Max's scathing remark. He got up and took a turn around the room, talking again about the pretty girls on the Nevsky.

"We'd do better to put our heads together and decide what to do tonight—it happens to be Saturday," he said.

The working day was over. Max and Kapelkin went downstairs. When they reached the door Vladka came running up with a glow on his face that almost gave him a nimbus.

"I've been looking for you everywhere, Max. Where you been keeping yourself?"

"What's happened? Received a money order, won a lottery prize, or just gone batty?"

"Funny thing—I dropped into our room for a minute and if the telephone didn't have to ring just then. It was ... it was Vera calling. Happens to be her birthday. Called up to invite us. You too."

The floor heaved under Max. He drew a hand down his cheek and clenched his teeth.

"And you intend going?"

"Why not?" said Vladka defiantly. "Everybody'll be there. Why shouldn't I go?"

"All I can say is, I wish you a pleasant evening. Come along, Venya."

And they set off for the bus stop!

"Aren't you the joy-killer!" Vladka called after him.

## REALISTIC OR ABSTRACT ART!

A night in two tones: black and white. The black is still and majestic, the white whirls round and round as it falls gently on roofs, trees and earth. The trees stretch out soft paws, the branches of the bushes are like antlers. Where have you seen such a snow-fall before? In a film? In childhood? In a dream? How soft and peaceful! How easy to walk, as if one's shoes had wings on them. The streets are empty. What time is it? The young man running across the square takes no notice of the clock on the tower whose hands are united and erect, like the bayonet of a sentry's gun. The young man rushes down the street with his coat flying open. He mutters something to himself as he runs. He has lost his scarf, a handsome Norwegian scarf that he was very proud of. The next thing he will lose is his beret, which is perched precariously

over one ear. One would have difficulty in saying whether the young man is just in extraordinarily high spirits, is possessed of some idea, or is in that state of tipsiness when the wildest notions enter one's mind.

"... We're all inclined to be suspicious, the only thing we trust is wine...." What's that from? All the damn quotations I've got in my head! I won't read any more—not a thing. Got to learn to think independently. Hell, as if it mattered. "We're all inclined to be suspicious...." Oh, yes—a popular song. And not like that. "We're all a little superstitious." That's how we used to sing it. When I was fifteen. Thought I was grown up. That dance at the girls' school. Me a kid with a big head and two round patches like spectacles on the seat of my trousers. Nobody thought of teasing a kid for such a thing those days. The post-war years. Nowadays, if a fellow's shoes are old-fashioned—good stout shoes, but, oh Christ, with round toes!... Complicates life, this problem of keeping up to date. No other problems? What about work? What about love? "We're all inclined to be suspicious." Even when we're alone? Oh, no. No drunks admitted. Mustn't go there. God, I love her! Or maybe I've just talked myself into it? What else is love but an idea you're possessed of?

The snow keeps coming down. The young man is singing now. In front of him some janitors are shovelling the snow off the sidewalk.

"Hey, you penguins!" he calls out.

Through the gauze of snow they really do look like penguins, their white aprons broad at the bottom, tapering to the top.

Max dashed across the familiar yard, in one leap was at the familiar door, in another inside the familiar entrance. Slowly he climbed the yellowing marble stairs. His eyes fell on the familiar chandelier suspended from the ceiling, on the mosaics embellishing the window-frames of the landings, on the bronze grating of the elevator shaft. Those eclectic architects built things to last, he said to himself.

Too bad the effects of the wine were wearing off. True, his feet refused to obey him, didn't want to climb the stairs. If only he could go to sleep! The dormitory on Dragunskaya Street was only a fifteen-minute walk away and there was an empty bed in room 120 tonight. Take off his shoes, stretch out his legs, close his eyes, and—to hell with everything! His mind would be switched off like the municipal power-station and out would go the lights, those knots of nervous excitation in his brain. Bliss. Oh, no, too easy a way out—sleep, death, or dull resignation. Was he courageous only when he had alcohol flowing through his veins? Come on, strike up the band! Forward undaunted! Third, fourth, fifth, sixth floor! Put your finger on that bell. Hold it. Don't take it off. Wake everybody up. Here comes somebody.

The door was opened the width of the chain. The face of Vesehlin gleamed whitely in the darkness.

"What is it? Who is it? Has anything happened?"

"Greetings," said Max. "It's me."

"Sorry?"

Next he'll say "I haven't the honour. . . ." He'd be the born gentleman to a thug that held him up on a dark night.

"I believe my friend Vladislav Karpov is here," murmured Max.

Heels were heard tapping lightly on the hall floor.

"Let him in. Oh, get away, Oleg. What are you afraid of?"

When are you going to learn not to stammer, you poor slob? When are you going to be able to look calmly into those eyes, calmly take that hand and press it (better—kiss it lightly) and say casually: "Your worshipful servant. . ." or something greasy like that?

"Greetings," said Max hoarsely. "It's me."

"Max? Come in."

Marvellous control. A light, cheery tone; just another friend of her childhood.

In the dark hall he took off his coat, felt for his scarf, gave a little laugh. Vera turned on the light and he suddenly saw his full-length reflection in the looking-glass. Not very encouraging.

"Awfully glad you didn't forget my birthday, Max."

"Are you? Glad you're glad. Vladka here?"

"Vladka's glum. The party was gay a while ago,

but now everybody's run down. They're talking philosophy. Come in."

"Just a minute."

He rummaged in his pockets, cold with fear: could he have lost that, too? No, here it was.

"Congratulations, Vera. And you, Oleg . . . er . . . I don't know your patronymic. . . ."

Vesehlin made a disparaging gesture.

"Just call me Oleg."

"Thanks. And in general . . . I hope you'll excuse me . . . it's rather late . . . but I decided to come anyway. Here, Vera . . . remember, you said you wanted one of these?"

"Max! Oh, it's lovely!"

Vera reached for Max's head, drew it down and kissed him on the cheek. A nice friendly kiss—nothing more. Or perhaps it was too tender to be just friendly?

The chairs and furniture had been pushed to the wall. On the floor in one corner stood a tape-recorder.

*Those ten little fingers*
*Shall never be forgot. . .*

crooned a deep female voice. Several couples were prancing in the centre of the floor. Among them was Vladka. He had his arm around a thin girl and was looking into her eyes with the confidence of the irresistible male. On catching sight of Max he stopped, waved, and cried:

"Look who's here! Max, ol' boy, ol' pal, ol' brother mine." He led his girl over to him and said, stroking her hair: "Ever in your life seen the likes of this?"

"Beware of him, my girl," said Max, and went into the next room where most of the guests were to be found reclining in easy-chairs and on the sofa. Some of the faces were familiar to him—professors, graduate students, a well-known actor. Vesehlin was standing in the middle of the room in the pose of a fighting-cock facing a tall youth with a lot of hair and wearing a shapeless pull-over.

"Rubbish!" cried Vesehlin. "The people will never accept such art."

"You place yourself in opposition to evolution, progress and the contemporary spirit," drawled the young man with the hair. "In our age the emotional effect of painting must approach that of music. It must reflect the vibrations of the human soul."

"What sort of vibrations of the soul can be expressed by dumping a pail of paint on canvas and tramping over it in hip boots?"

"That's an extreme case. Ecstatic trance. The ordinary person can't be expected to penetrate into the mystery of the creative process. I have heard that a certain writer keeps his feet in a basin of water when he works. Does that mean he's crazy? Not at all. It's just that the human machine is more complicated than the physiologists assume."

Funny ideas that guy's got, thought Max.

Abstract art was a subject that stirred passions. At every art exhibition heated discussions were held by students, doctors, workers, old folks on pension. Most of them denounced it in no uncertain terms. Max's mind was not made up. Who knows? he thought. Perhaps it's just beyond my understanding.

"Evolution, you say? From the superb technique of Repin and Polenov to the garbage dump?"

"Good Lord, are we never to get beyond those Repins and Polenovs? We've got enough naturalistic painters in our own day without resurrecting them. Your so-called realism is hopelessly inadequate in an age of colour photography and cinema. Can realistic painters produce anything to equal the photographs in *Ogonyok*? And still they go on making their painstaking copies of nature." He dismissed the subject with a hopeless gesture. "But what's the use of discussing it with you? You've got to be young to appreciate the new art."

Everybody was shocked by this blow to the would-be young professor. Its stunning effect on him was seen in the jerking of his shoulders and the twitching of his cheeks. Vera jumped up angrily.

"You're taking a lot on yourself," she cried to the boy with the hair. "Who delegated you to speak for all the young people? Naturalism has had its day, but not realism. Vrubel, Marquet, Cézanne, Matisse —what do they represent? Real art. Which is more than I can say about your Braque and Pollak, who,

by the way, you've never seen except in a few third-rate reproductions in *Crocodile*. Try being a little more modest, Foma."

Everybody laughed and Max said:

"A very touching outburst. You're the ideal Soviet wife, Vera."

Foma turned to him and they both began shouting and waving their arms. They were refuted and scoffed at but it made no impression on them. Max was in a perverse mood. He felt that he was protesting against Vesehlin's sterling character, the hypocrisy of his wife (beloved by Max), the planned symmetry of the professorial apartment, the endless winter, his boring job, Yarchuk and his machinations, and even Dumpfer, for whom he had the deepest respect and whose words he had been pondering for the last few days. Avoiding Vera's eye, he spoke faster and more heatedly, as if afraid that the moment he grew silent everyone would guess the secret he was trying to keep. He stopped only when Vera's father got up and put his glass of Narzan down on the table very deliberately. Everybody fell silent. The professor had no objection to argument. On the contrary, he liked nothing better than to have young people gather in his apartment and air their views. But at this point he decided to intervene; if he didn't, the morose and likable Max might say things he would be sorry for. Apparently the boy was a little in love with Vera and angry with her.

"Max," he said, "and you too, young man; don't think you are pioneers in the field of modern art. Forty years ago I heard the same sort of young people say the same sort of things. The fact is" (here he smiled and scratched his chin), "I myself was a futurist in my day. Yes, I was. I can show you a collection containing one of my opuses:

*Gnarled giants,*
*Snarl the Universe,*
*Lest you forget—*
*Ekh! Ekh!*

"Amusing? It was gems like that that we championed in my youth. I have no objection to your shouting and ruffling up your feathers. Help yourself. But one of these days you'll come to see people and things and events in their true light, and the sooner you do, the better. Only then will you understand art. Not 'isms'. You understand them now. I mean real art."

He spoke at length, growing more excited with every word, until he, too, was waving his arms. "Eternal truths are what we find in Repin's pictures—eternal truths! And you recommend colour photography! For landscapes, perhaps, but how can colour photography substitute complicated human psychology?"

"Why, don't the movies deal with complicated human psychology?" burst out Max. Turning rudely on his heel, he went into the next room.

Foma followed him. Everything was simpler here. Jazz was thumping. Vladka was dancing with the thin girl. Foma suggested that they go into the kitchen "for a swig".

"We did good battle with those reactionaries," he said as he poured out the cognac. "The minute I saw you I could see right away you were a live guy who wanted to know things."

By this time Max had had enough of Foma's thrilling voice, flowing locks, tossing head, and pale sinewy neck sticking out of the shapeless sweater.

"At our Art School they're always suppressing the moderns," he said. "Thank God there's a few people who understand. I actually got a good price for one of my pictures this autumn."

"That so?" said Max glumly.

"Found a guy who appreciates my grotesque style. This particular picture was an irrational portrait of one of my neighbours."

"Not 'Melancholy Adagio' by any chance?"

"Mean to say you've seen it?"

"You must be cracked."

"I am. What of it?" laughed Foma, but Max could see he was hurt.

There I go again! he thought. Why the hell did I have to go and shoot my mouth off? I only hurt Vera and her father. Fact is I understand as much about art as a pig does about poker. All right, that "Melancholy Adagio" is crap, just a fad, but what

about Picasso and Matisse? They're the real thing, no doubt about that. How is one to draw the line between what is and what isn't? *I* certainly don't know how. A person's got to know. Got to know a lot, and I don't know anything. So why shoot my mouth off? Oh, what the hell difference does it make, so long as Vera doesn't love me? What difference does it make whether I do the right or the wrong thing, shout or hold my tongue, love or hate? What difference does anything make, so long as nobody loves me?

He shook the bottle and looked around. He was alone in the kitchen. He was sitting on a stool at a table piled high with food, and the tiled walls were swimming round and round and letting out a thin ring.

I'm beginning all over again. I'll pass out right here, he thought happily, drinking cognac straight out of the bottle. Suddenly the walls stopped swimming. Vera had come into the kitchen. She came up to Max and pressed his head to her breast. For a moment. One brief moment. He glanced up into her face and caught a look of pity, and of an odd, squeamish sort of love.

So that's how it is! She's probably thinking: why did I have to fall in love with a worthless guy like him? With a nobody like him? It's clear she wants to call it off.

"Well, Vera," he said firmly, "so everything's over?"

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know, Max!" she said

in despair, sinking down beside him. "Pour me out a drink."

He rejoiced. So she hadn't yet made up her mind! Perhaps she didn't consider him a nobody? She ought to understand why he was like that. Love, and the long winter, and his thoughts.... But the end would have to come some time. Even soon. As soon as things were clear to him. Then he'd be in a state to do something.

"Make you a sandwich?"

"If you please."

"Sardine?"

"No, cheese."

He was sitting in the kitchen with his wife. They had just come home from work and were having a bite and talking. It was quiet in the flat, so quiet they could hear the soft breathing of Keshka, their baby.

A burst of laughter came from the other room, and that woman's voice singing:

*Those ten little fingers*
*Shall never be forgot....*

Millions of men and women come home to their kitchens every evening for a bite and a chat without realising how lucky they are.

"So you don't know? But things can't go on as they are, can they?"

"No. You and I can't go on seeing each other as we have been. I can't deceive two people at once. I can't deceive even one of them."

"So everything *is* over," he said.

"No," she cried. "I can't give you up. But you must understand, Max, that if I leave Oleg I'll have to leave my job. Not because he would make things difficult for me—he's too decent for that—but because—"

"I understand."

"And that would mean dropping my graduate work, my thesis, my little Mickey Mouse—"

"Mickey Mouse?"

"Didn't I tell you? They've given me a monkey for experiments. I can't tell you how—"

"In a word," interrupted Max mockingly, "the old conflict between love and duty, or rather love and a thesis."

"It's easy for you to treat it lightly, you'll be travelling around the world and I'll have to stay behind and wait for you. That's how it will be, won't it?"

They sat without speaking, listening to the vigorous thumping coming from the other room. In a little while Max said:

"Why did you ever marry him, Vera?"

"You don't realise what a fine person he is, Max. I was going through hell at the time, and he helped me. And then he's so in love with his work . . . and with me."

"In other words, fall in love with your work if you want your girl to fall in love with you," Max could not resist saying.

Vera shook her head disapprovingly, laughed, and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"I've got an idea," said Max. "You can transfer to another institute—to the Institute of Experimental Medicine, for instance."

"I've already thought of that. No doubt that's what I will do, but not until next year."

"In other words, wait?"

"Six months."

"And you intend to?"

"I do."

"You're showing great resolution in your lack of resolution."

"Yes, and I mean to," she said firmly.

Max jumped up and put his cigarettes and matches in his pocket.

"To hell with it all!" he muttered. He strode across the kitchen and, when he got to the door, turned to say through his teeth:

"I wish you joy. You and your ... Mickey Mouse."

"Max!" she cried feebly.

He rushed back, tipped up her head and pressed his lips to hers in a long kiss.

"I love you, love you, love you," he whispered, then ran out, leaving Vera in a state almost of collapse.

In the hall he met Vladka, who was holding the coat of the girl whose likes nobody had ever seen before.

He asked Max if he was leaving and wouldn't he like to join him in seeing "the kid" home. And as he said it he gave him such a searching look that Max was sure he knew everything.

## TRUE FRIENDS

The two friends and the girl walked out to the canal embankment. The snow had stopped falling. The air was mild and light. The snowy crowns of the clipped lime-trees were like giant dandelions gone to seed, and for a moment Max fancied that if he blew hard all this fluffy snow would whirl back up into the sky out of which it had fallen.

From time to time the girl glanced at Vladka in sad perplexity. Max felt sorry for her. But Vladka went on making feeble jokes and throwing well-aimed snowballs at the lampposts.

"Why didn't you ask for her telephone?" Max asked when she had left them.

"I'm sick of that sort of thing," answered Vladka brusquely, putting a cigarette into his mouth and snapping his fingers as a request for matches. When he had lit it he observed: "It's a sign of old age to want something steady."

"Ripe age, not old age," laughed Max. He would have given a lot to know what Vladka had in mind by "something steady", but he was afraid to ask, knowing that confidences on Vladka's part would require reciprocity.

Vladka took him by the lapels of his coat and looked him straight in the eye.

"Today," he said, "I've had the satisfaction of discovering that the old feeling has burnt itself out and left nothing but ashes. I'm as light and airy as an empty bottle. I suppose you've guessed it's about Vera I'm speaking."

Max felt a pang of joy. So Vladka knew all about him and Vera! Knew everything and was giving him to understand they could still be friends. In other words, there was no reason for hiding the truth any longer from this closest of friends. Hooray for Vladka Karpov, the sly old fox!

"It's true that Vera and I are in love," said Max. "I was afraid you—"

"You sonuvabitch," growled Vladka. "A lonely mountain goat, a single clam in the whole ocean. Forgotten all the soup we've shared? Come on, out with it! What's going on inside that cave you call your soul?"

They were standing outside the girl's house, in the shadow of the façade, which hung over them like a cliff. They slapped each other on the back, laughed, and without a word struck out for the Vyborgskaya

Side. There was no sense in going back to the port, it would take till morning to reach it.

Sunday morning found Vladka and Max in the waiting-room of the Finland Station, where they sat dozing, shoulder to shoulder, waiting for the lunch-counter to open. When this moment arrived they bought a few sandwiches and hot coffee and breakfasted on the bench where they had been dozing. Soon the station was invaded by noisy skiing parties.

"Remember, Max, we promised to pay Sasha a ski visit?" said Vladka.

"We'll go," said Max. "I'm sure Irina will give us a week off at our own expense."

"Won't Lancelot be glad!"

"By the way, we haven't been to see his folks for some time. What say to dropping in on them now?"

Sasha's mother opened the door to them. The apron she was wearing jarred with her scholarly appearance.

"Good morning, boys," she said happily. "What a pity! What a pity!"

"What's a pity?"

"That you didn't come yesterday. Then you would have met her."

"Who?"

"Sasha's wife."

"Hold me up, Max!" groaned Vladka. "Hold me up, I tell you!"

"What's that you said?" asked Max. "Or perhaps you were only joking?"

"It is no joking matter," said Sasha's mother. "It raises a great problem. Sasha is now a family man. Perhaps there will be children . . . grandchildren. . . ." Her eyes were shining.

She led the boys into the dining-room where Sasha's father was having his morning coffee.

"Morning, boys," he said. "What do you think of that son of ours? Just imagine! One fine morning we get a telegram saying: 'Wire us your blessing Inna Sasha.' That's 20th-century tempo for you!"

"But you must admit she's a darling, Dmitry," put in Sasha's mother.

"Oh, yes, she's a darling," said Sasha's father. "And now look at this."

He handed them a copy of the local Kruglogorye paper, *The Northern Lights,* in which an article on the fourth page under the heading "Real Soviet People" had been marked in pencil. It read:

"The following took place on a dark winter night. Forest warden Kurochkin of the Shum Lake district was attacked by a bear. He suffered serious injuries. News of the accident reached the district hospital in Kruglogorye. Immediately two young Komsomol members, Dr. Zelenin, graduate of the Leningrad Medical School, and nurse Dasha Guryanova, set out in a helicopter to save his life. The helicopter could not land near the forest warden's cabin, and so the

two young people climbed down a rope ladder. Inside the cabin, by the light of a kerosene lamp, they performed a difficult operation. But that was not the end of their difficulties. In the morning the patient had a haemorrhage. The second stage of the operation could only be done in the hospital, and so without waiting for help to come to them, Dr. Zelenin and nurse Guryanova put the patient on a sledge and set out through five feet of snow. They covered nine miles before they were met by the hospital horse and sledge. The patient's life was saved.

"That is behaviour worthy of true Soviet people, true Komsomol members! That is behaviour worthy of the heroic times we live in! These young people. . . ."

"Perhaps it's silly," said Sasha's mother, "but Dmitry and I. . . ."

She took off her *pince-nez* and turned away.

"Quite," said Sasha's father.

"That's something!" exclaimed Vladka as he tossed the paper on the table.

"That's *something*!" breathed Max with feeling.

## Chapter IX
## INNA ZELENINA

The train seemed bent on destroying itself, so fiercely did it charge through the night. Gusts of wind pierced the enclosed platform where Inna was stand-

ing, but for ten minutes she had been defying them, hugging herself for warmth.

In a few hours she would be in Moscow where her parents, her home in Gagarinsky Lane, and the twenty years of her past life were waiting for her. Stubbornly waiting for her, even though she had cut herself off from them. Happy, carefree years! It wasn't easy for her to throw them off, to break with all she had become accustomed to. But she must make the effort. She was no longer just a pretty young girl who went in for sports and was dependent on her parents. She was Inna Zelenina, wife of a comical, purposeful, reliable, sensitive young man. She was the stronger of the two in this union. There could be no doubt about that. It had been clear from the very first. She was quick and decisive and created the impression of being a rational young thing. That was a mistake. She could admit this to herself as she stood alone out on this platform. She was not really rational, not the least bit. First she committed herself, then considered the advisability of the step she had taken. Risky, wasn't it? Fortunately someone always pulled her out of the tight corners she got herself into. But she would be different from now on. Everything would be different.

Inna walked up and down the narrow platform, hopped on one foot, and gazed at the square of glass separating her from the darkness wailing and moaning beyond. Why didn't she go back to her compartment?

Why was she in such a state of alarm? What, after all, had happened? She had got married, nothing more. A good half of the girls in her class had done the same, and Ada Margelyan had even got a divorce. It was Sasha who made everything seem so dramatic. It wasn't really dramatic and she wouldn't let it be. What did it matter that they lived so far away from each other? Other couples did too, heaps and heaps of them. Next year she would transfer to Leningrad University and then they would be quite near each other. Why all this emotionalism? Br-r-r! It's cold—even in this thick sweater.

She went back into the car. The doors of all the compartments were shut. She jerked down the drop seat at the window and sat on it with her chin in her hand. One by one the scenes of her short stay in Kruglogorye passed through her mind.

Her first night. Everything a deep blue. Frost. A silence that seemed incredible after the bustle of Moscow and the roar of the train. A queer apartment with creaking floor boards and an antique dinner table. She had seen similar tables in the second-hand shop on Arbat Street. She walked round and round the room, her head full of the wildest, craziest thoughts.

"We'll put the china-closet here, the piano here, and a couple of armchairs over there. We can put up a partition to make a children's room. And here. . . ."

Suddenly she felt ashamed and for the first time was aware of the audacity of her coming here. It was as if she had suddenly waked up to find herself in a strange land to which she had been transported in her sleep. Was it only yesterday that she was frantically packing her things for this trip, deaf to the protests of her parents? She suddenly remembered that her father had called her an idiot. And then ... the dark little wayside station, the jolly cripple in his sheepskin, the sheepskin he had wrapped her in from head to foot, the wild ride over an unspeakable road, the extraordinary silence, the dim lights in the night, the strange apartment. Only to discover that the person she had come to see, the person who was less a reality than a creation of her imagination, had flown off in a helicopter. Nobody could help her now, nobody could undo what she had done. She was alone. The worst was yet to come: the encounter with him. She knew she need not fear him, that he was good, absurd, impulsive.... But what if he was *not* any of these things? What if he was as cold and bleak as this apartment? What if he was stupid and unfeeling?

She rushed into the room where his bed stood, ran over to the desk piled high with books, and opened all the drawers. What did she care about propriety now? She must see him as he was this very minute! Surely he had a photograph album. Instead of an album she found a few envelopes stuffed with photo-

graphs. She seized on a picture that had been enlarged. Three grinning boys looked up at her, their arms on one another's shoulders, their hair blowing in the wind. One of them was in his under-shirt, another was naked to the waist, the third, Sasha, was in shirt and tie. Inna remembered all of them. The naked one whose name, if she remembered correctly, was Max, had a tendency to be sarcastic. The gay one was Vladka. Inna always had boys like Vladka trailing her. Sasha's lean face was lifted, his eyes were narrowed, and even without his glasses one could see that he was near-sighted. With a movement of her elbow Inna pushed aside a heap of papers covered with fine writing and with drawings scribbled in the margin (ships with flying sails, knights in armour, people who looked like tadpoles), and discovered her own photograph in a simple frame of polished wood. She took Sasha's picture out of her handbag, put the two together, gazed at them for a while, then laid her head on her arm and fell asleep.

Sasha did not come home until two o'clock of the following day. He staggered as if ill. His eyebrows and the collar of his coat were white with rime. Dragging his feet in enormous felt boots, he came up to Inna, pulled off his fur cap, and murmured:

"Hello, Inna. I'm awfully sorry."

Then he collapsed on the bed. With a cry Inna ran over to him, pulled off his sheepskin and felt

boots, and rubbed his face, hands, feet. He moaned softly. She ran out into the kitchen, lit the oil-stove and put a pan of water on it. When she came back he was sitting up. He gave a crooked smile. Inna went over to him. He shrank away and held out his hand.

"Forgive me," he said again. "Things were such that . . . I couldn't meet you." He got up and said almost in his usual voice: "I came in just to say hello. I've got to go back to my patient—he's in a bad way."

Inna lost her temper and raised her voice. As Sasha stood with his head on one side listening attentively to what she said his face cleared.

"Why, your hands are frost-bitten!" she cried and seized them again.

A blissful smile spread over his face.

"No, they're not," he retorted. "Wait, I'll be back in no time and we'll have a bottle of champagne."

He gave her hands a little squeeze before he strode over to the door.

That evening they had guests: Yegorov and his wife, and two boys who came on skis. One of the boys was Timosha, the other Boris, of volley-ball fame. The Yegorovs brought a cake, the boys a bottle of vodka and a knapsack full of oranges. A regular feast!

"Are we to take this gathering as a sort of dress rehearsal?" asked Boris, winking at Timosha.

"Shut up!" whispered Timosha, throwing Inna an embarrassed and apologetic look.

Inna smiled in a sort of daze and turned to Sasha. Here they were, the two of them, sitting at the table with four other people, listening to their conversation, laughing at their jokes, but really caring nothing at all for what was said. They were sitting at opposite ends of the table and that put an enormous distance between them, one that would be hard to overcome but was sure to be overcome because nothing else mattered.

Boris turned on the radio and they began dancing to old-fashioned jazz and older-fashioned polkas.

Sasha and Inna saw their guests off as far as the post-office. Yegorov limped bravely beside his wife down the icy planks of the footpath, while Boris and Timosha escorted them slowly on skis in the middle of the road. The moon, with orange rings around it, hung like a Japanese lantern above the town.

When they came back Inna began clearing the table. Once she paused for a moment in the middle of the floor. She was wearing a tight black dress cut very low. After midnight the electric current was reduced. Yellow shadows played over her face and throat, sharpening her features. Sasha sat down on the window-sill and took a cigarette out of the pack with shaking fingers. Inna walked to the stove, to the door, back to the stove again. The floor boards creaked under her feet.

The ticking of the clock was disturbingly loud.

"Br-r-r!" she said with a laugh.

"What?" said Sasha, jumping up.

"I'm frozen."

"Perhaps I'd better set fire to the stove. I think there's still some fuel out there," muttered Sasha as he went into the outhouse where Filimon left a pile of birch logs once a week.

What's the matter with me? he thought. I talk like an idiot. Why did I say "set fire to the stove"?

Inna did not so much as smile at his confused speech and nervous movements. "That's an idea!" she cried and ran out into the outhouse. It was so dark that she ran into him. He dropped his load of wood (one of the logs fell painfully on his foot) and put his hands on her bare shoulders. With a readiness that came as a little shock to him, she pressed her body against his. The recoil lasted only an instant, for he knew she was doing it only for him, for him alone. He knew this definitely.

He kissed her again and again and held her fast. At last she wrenched herself free, flung open the door (a blade of light slashed his face) and was gone. He took his head in his hands and staggered about in the darkness of the tiny outhouse, bumping into the wood-pile and the door-jamb and chanting to himself: "Too good to be true!" He slumped down on a sack of something to have a smoke and take himself in hand, holding at bay the admission that

he was again afraid to face her whom a moment before he had kissed in the dark.

"Hey, mister, where are you?" she called out from the other room.

Sasha sprang to his feet, picked up the wood, and went into the dining-room. He found Inna sitting in front of the open stove gazing steadily at the grey pile of ashes.

She did not look up, she did not move a muscle. She was in that dazed state when a person is powerless to move, to so much as tear his eyes off some trifling object. In such a state people usually do not think or feel, but the curve of Inna's body, the lift of her shoulders showed she was a little afraid. Sasha knelt behind her, dropped his wood on the floor and peered into the stove. A cold and tainted breath seemed to rise out of it, as out of the toothless mouth of an old man. Could it have been only the day before yesterday that he had sat in front of it watching teeth of flame snapping and leaping inside?

It seemed to him Inna was trying to read her future in the ashes. He shrugged off a pang of terror and suddenly found his nose ten inches away from the soft rings of her short hair. In another moment his nose was submerged in the golden waves.

... The future will be as bright as the flames. Happiness will surely come to these two sitting in tight embrace in front of the crackling stove. It has come already. It is whirling round them, snatching their

breath away, contracting their hearts, paralysing their minds. The supreme, the intoxicating happiness of love. Perhaps people will disapprove of their rushing headlong to meet their happiness, of not turning aside and waiting, of covering the space separating them from each other in too short a time. Disapprove, if you will, pass a judgement dictated by good sense, remind them of the "good old times" when couples announced their engagement, wore engagement rings, and waited ... waited ... waited. The two sitting beside the stove are indifferent to your judgement. They, who once roamed free in space like molecules, suddenly collided, gazed at each other for a moment in incredulous recognition, then threw themselves into each other's arms.

"Tomorrow we'll get married," said Sasha decisively.

"You silly!" laughed Inna, stroking his hair. "Is it so important?"

"Important or not, that's what we'll do."

"Dear me!" she said, laughing again and withdrawing ever so little. "You're a different man, Sasha."

## THE DOCTOR'S WIFE

Inna goes shopping. There are three groceries in the community and the women distinguish them by the names of the clerks: Stesha's, Nina's, and Polina Ivanovna's.

"Where did you get that fish, Manya?"

"At Nina's."

"Drop into Polina Ivanovna's—they've just brought her some of that delicious Polish sausage."

Inna is a housewife. She gets meals for her husband. She studies the cook-book and feeds him only what is good for him. He appreciates her efforts. Every chop she fries is for him a sort of miracle. He eats his beet soup with reverence. Inna is proud of her achievement. Inna is happy.

Inna bends down to tighten her skis. She goes flying down the well-worn ski-track on the hill, bending now to the left, now to the right, to avoid the bushes. A group of village children are shouting, running, turning somersaults. Inna flourishes to an effective standstill at the bottom. Lumberjacks with axes and saws over their shoulders are coming down the path. She hears one of them say:

"That's class for you! Some skier, the doctor's wife!"

Little clouds hover round the lumberjacks' heads: blue clouds of tobacco smoke, white clouds of vapour from their breathing. The ski-tracks glitter in the sunlight, so do the icicles on the bushes. They seem to give off a musical note at the slightest touch—the faint breath of the wind or the tender caress of a sunbeam. Inna is happy.

Inna makes the acquaintance of Lukonya, the night-watchman. He walks over the ice of the lake not far from shore with a big wooden mallet in his hands. Underneath the ice, as in a glass aquarium, a fish can be seen circling about, switching its tail. Lukonya plants his feet wide apart and lifts the mallet. The fish swims towards him. Thump! Lukonya brings it down with all his force.

"Oh!" cries Inna.

White cracks streak out in all directions from under the mallet. The fish lies motionless. Lukonya runs for a pointed iron bar.

"How's that?" he says, holding the gleaming fish over his head.

"Isn't that called poaching?" asks Inna.

Lukonya stands blinking at her in perplexity a moment, then holds out the fish.

"Here," he says. "With my regards to the doc."

Unquestionably she is party to the crime as she carries the fish home triumphantly. How Sasha will laugh when she tells him where she got it! Inna is happy.

Another day has dawned. Patches of sunlight quiver on the blue snow in the forest. The fir-trees spread their shaggy wings as if about to fly away. Inna is especially happy today. Sasha has taken her with him on a call. They must ski four miles through the forest, and when he finishes his work they will go

skiing on the hills. In front of her she catches glimpses of his blue jacket and the rhythmic swing of his sticks. It is a pleasure to follow in the track laid by her husband and to keep her eyes on his lanky form, which loses all its awkwardness when he is on skis. He looks very self-confident on skis. And on the whole he has much more character than she supposed when they first met in Komarovo. He has grown a little tougher. At that time he was an innocent youth frightened out of his wits by his own daring, silently imploring her not to judge him by first impressions, stammering and gesticulating excitedly when he spoke of medicine or poetry. But even then there was something about him that told her he was a person not to be turned from his chosen course. Perhaps it was this purposefulness that had first attracted her. She had always admired boys who were resolute, self-confident, cheerful, and reluctant to show their feelings. But that was not Sasha. She had addressed her letters to a dreamer, a freakish young man who was absurdly sincere, a representative of a particular type whom she had always considered goody-goody. But that was not Sasha either. What was he? Too late to ponder that now. Now she was following where he led.

Engrossed in her thoughts, Inna fell far behind. Sasha, she saw, had already emerged from the forest and was standing leaning on his sticks on a bare hillside. He looked like The Dreamer. That was why

she loved him. Because he was always different, always showing another aspect—every day, every hour. And at the same time he was always himself.

What nonsense! she exclaimed to herself, meaning: stop all this doubting, rationalising, analysing! You love him, that's all. Love him for what he is and for whatever he will become.

This would never do—she must take the lead. After all, she was the stronger in their partnership, and besides she was a second-category skier, while he, poor old boy, was only a third.

Inna set hard to work with arms and legs, flew out of the forest, darted a roguish glance at Sasha and whizzed down the hill. Her skis carried her over the firm snow down into a valley where smoke was curling out of the chimneys of a hamlet.

They found the house they were looking for and the mistress came out on the porch to meet them.

"Who's sick?" asked Dr. Zelenin as he unfastened his skis. The woman made no reply. He glanced up at her and thought he saw embarrassment in her face.

"Vanya been eating snow again? I told you he had a weak throat, Maria Vladimirovna. Or is it Nina this time?"

"The kids are all right," she said, and now the embarrassment was definite.

"Something wrong with you?"

"No, I'm all right. Come in, Alexander Dmitrievich."

When she had let him pass in front of her into the entrance she murmured:

"My man's sick."

"Your man?" repeated Sasha in surprise. "But you. . . ."

He knew this plump woman, not yet middle-aged, was a widow. His surprise increased when he caught a glimpse of Ibraghim Enaleyev lying on the bed behind the flowered curtains.

He was lying with eyes closed and face twisted with pain. Sensing that somebody was looking at him, he started, sat up, recognised Sasha, and shouted at the woman:

"So you sent for him, did you? Didn't I tell you not to?"

"What's the matter with you, Ibraghim?" asked Sasha.

"It's his belly, Alexander Dmitrievich," said Maria Vladimirovna. "Made him howl today, it did."

Dr. Zelenin sat down beside the bed, asked the man questions and examined him. When he finished he said Ibraghim had better go to the hospital. The man looked from his wife to the doctor.

"Will you cut me open?"

"No."

"Then I'll go."

Afraid it's a stomach ulcer, Sasha said to himself as he went out. Have to put him on a diet. But of course he won't stick to it.

The doctor, however, was more interested in the man's life story. When he had visited Barracks No. 3 during the flu epidemic he had felt that Ibraghim's indignation had been genuine, and this, for him, was the real test of a man. Later Timosha had told him Ibraghim was working hard and seemed to be gradually making a break with Fyodor's gang. Now he was married, and to a woman everybody respected. She would not have taken a worthless man.

Sasha narrowed his eyes and lifted a hand to protect them from the dazzling sunlight. He saw Inna climbing sideways up the hill.

They skied until darkness set in, when they went home, hardly able to drag their feet along.

Inna and Sasha are sitting on the sofa with their legs tucked up under them. The only lights in the room are the green eye of the radio and the red tip of Sasha's cigarette.

Inna puts her head on her husband's shoulder. They sit with their arms round each other. The expectant waiting of the audience in the Large Hall of the Moscow Conservatory is brought to them by radio waves.

And now the miracle takes place. It is as if some extraordinarily good and sensitive person has laid big hands on their shoulders and is gazing at them with enormous soul-searching, all-seeing eyes. The notes of a piano are heard. Sasha says softly:

*One note, a chord, a run,*
*And, like a wounded eagle,*
*Chopin's mournful phrases*
*Wing among drooping stars.*

"I remember," whispers Inna.

There is nothing more to be said. Nothing more ought to be said, but Sasha cannot resist exclaiming:

"What happiness to have some connection with art—even the humblest—even just pulling the piano on the stage!"

"Shh!" says Inna sharply.

The presence that has entered moves about the dark room, gazes out of the window, lifts its shoulders in silent interrogation, shakes its fist in wrath, presses its hands to its breast in speechless happiness, and at last, with a solemn gesture of farewell, withdraws.

A pause.

"I, too, play the piano. . ." ventures Inna.

He knows instantly that she plays well. If she dared to tell him at this moment, then she must play well.

"How I long to hear you!"

## DEFLATED

Ibraghim wandered through the birch grove waiting for his wife. There was no denying it, he was still embarrassed by this new relationship to a woman, a relationship the old Ibraghim could not have dreamed

of. He was ashamed to have people see him with her. That is why he always waited for her here in the birch grove on the hospital grounds. As he walked up and down he recalled walking up and down the embankment in Baku with the same sense of excitement long years before in that other life when he was only eighteen years old.

Suddenly he caught sight of a familiar figure coming towards him with a rolling slouch. It was Fyodor Bugrov.

"Hi, Ibraghim," he hailed breezily, slapping him on the back.

"Hi," said Ibraghim cautiously.

"Getting your lousy guts cured?"

"Yeah, I'm feeling better."

Fyodor pushed him towards a bench, brushed off the snow with his mitten, pulled a bottle of vodka out of his pocket, spread out a newspaper in which a piece of cheese and some salted cucumbers had been wrapped.

"Here's to your health, Ibraghim. Take a swig."

Ibraghim backed away.

"I'm on a diet, Fyodor."

"Wha-at?" drawled Fyodor.

"A diet. Can't eat anything—no mutton, no herring, no vodka, no nothing. Doctor's orders."

Fyodor glowered at him.

"And you listen to that ass-eared quack?"

"No nothing," repeated Ibraghim, drooping. "Got a sick belly!"

"You don't say!" said Fyodor with mocking malice. "Have it your own way. Here goes!"

He threw back his head. The vodka gurgled. A cucumber crunched appetisingly. Ibraghim watched him with watering mouth, then snatched the bottle out of his hand. Five minutes later they were sitting with their arms round each other singing at the top of their quavering voices. Ibraghim, who had been off liquor for some time, was really drunk; Fyodor only pretended. He bawled the song with a cunning glint in his eyes. Suddenly they heard voices and laughter. A couple with skis over their shoulders were coming along the path from the lake. A moment later they recognised the doctor and his wife. Inna must have been telling her husband something funny, for he was bent double, choking with laughter. He would not have noticed Ibraghim and Fyodor if Inna had not called his attention to them. He stopped, wiped his spectacles, and fixed his eyes on Ibraghim, who sat without daring to move.

"So it's the cocktail hour, is it?" he drawled. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Ibraghim! Vodka and cucumbers! Fine food for ulcers! Well, I'm very sorry but I'll have to dismiss you for disobeying orders. As for you," turning to Fyodor, "I must ask you never again to set foot on hospital grounds."

He said this as if nothing had ever taken place between him and Fyodor. The latter went on sitting where he was without saying a word.

"You're a strict doctor, I must say!" laughed Inna when they were a few paces away. "Do you really mean to dismiss him?"

"Inna," said Sasha in a low voice, "that fellow you saw with Ibraghim is vicious, and he's got it in for me."

Something in his voice jerked Inna to seriousness.

"Who is he, Sasha?"

"A thug."

"What could you and he have in common?"

"I didn't want to tell you about it. . . ."

Inna stopped, seized him by the scarf, and said imperatively:

"I must know everything."

"All right. You know Dasha Guryanova, don't you? Fyodor is in love with her and he imagined that I was too. . . . Wait, now I've begun I must tell you everything."

"And were you really in love with her?" asked Inna casually.

"No, but at one time there did seem to be something between us. You know how hard it is to understand your feelings, to put the right tags on all of them: love, friendship, hate, and so on. Well, and so for a very brief spell it seemed to me I felt more for Dasha than just friendship."

"Was that when you began describing the scenery in your letters to me?" put in Inna.

"Yes, just about that time."

"In your last letters?"

"Yes. Try to understand—you were so far away! And I didn't even know you really," said Sasha, wondering if he ought to tell her how he had felt that night in the forest warden's house. No, he hadn't the courage for that now. Another time. In a year, perhaps.

"Oh, stop it," said Inna impatiently. "What do you take me for?"

"Well, then," he went on, "Fyodor hated me in the first place because he mistook me for a rival, secondly because I showed him up when he was pretending to be sick, and thirdly because I once knocked him down. At present he hates me because of everything in general—because I'm a doctor, because I wear glasses, because people here have taken a liking to me. . . ."

"Aren't you afraid of him, Sasha?"

"I was at one time, but now I think he's more afraid of me. Perhaps I'm assuming too much."

They had wandered off the path and walked the few remaining yards to the porch in silence, through deep snow, pulling their legs out with difficulty.

"At any rate, I don't intend giving in to him one iota," Sasha said vehemently when they reached the steps. He looked at Inna, expecting her to smile at him encouragingly, but she did not.

When Inna and Sasha were out of sight Ibraghim jumped up and began cursing under his breath in Azerbaijanian.

"What's all the fireworks about?" growled Fyodor. He sat there nursing his injured pride—huge, grim, shapeless. He looked like a whipped pup. His swagger was gone. There was something about him—perhaps his pose?—that reminded Ibraghim of one of his jail companions, the old housebreaker Suchok, who always smelled revoltingly of rancid fat.

"What's it about?" cried Ibraghim unhappily. "I've spoilt my diet, that's what! Spoilt it, spoilt it! Where's my wife? Why don't she come? We'll go and beg the doc not to put me out. Listen, Fyodor, don't come back here any more. What the hell brought you here anyway?"

"You stinking skunk!" hissed Fyodor, then spat and turned on his heel.

As he walked down the empty streets and saw the lights peering out invitingly from under the snow-covered roofs, he felt lonely and miserable for the first time in his life. He wanted to run away, bury his face in somebody's lap and sob his heart out. He had come here to the construction site with two purposes in mind: to take the girl he had long had his eye on, and to gather a gang around him that would do slick work in Leningrad. But Dasha would have nothing to do with him and the fellows had all become mama's boys—even those who were not averse to

drinking at his expense had of late turned their backs on him with contemptuous smiles. The rats! Signed up with the angels, trying to get put on the honour roll. Sit with their traps hanging open while that quack pours goo into their ears.

But the main thing is that Fyodor himself is not the same. The spunk has gone out of him. Imagine his being afraid of the doc! He can't get even with him for that incident in the club. Why shouldn't he up and give him a sock in the jaw, smash his goddam specs for him, or give him a neat little prick with his pocket-knife? Can't do it. Goes weak in the knees. Scared. And those crazy thoughts that keep him awake at night and make him want to cry or something? As if a guy was whispering in his ear: "You're crazy, Fyodor. Can't you see you're overboard and the ship's leaving you behind? Leaving you all alone. All alone." He feels like curling up in some dark corner until a kind hand comes and drags him out into the light of day.

A faint hum is borne to the village from the direction of Crystal Promontory. The bent figure of Fyodor Bugrov makes its way along the frozen boards of the footpath. He is afraid to raise his head and see a cold-hearted moon sailing in a wintry sky.

When he reaches home and enters the unheated house he swears under his breath, picks up an empty tin, black with soot, empties two packages of tea into it, and brews *chefir*. He finds *chefir* even more stimu-

lating than vodka. A drink of this brew gives him a feeling of power, of fury, of exultation, makes him want to fight. Beware of falling into Fyodor's hands after he's had a drink of *chefir*! Now he paces the floor, roaring and singing and shaking his fist.

He celebrated his twenty-third birthday just a week ago.

Ibraghim said to Inna:

"Thank the doctor for me, Inna, that's a good girl. Tell him Ibraghim's going to stop drinking, going to go on a diet, going to follow doctor's orders. Tell him Ibraghim's got a family. He's got children to take care of. Tell him he's going to be good."

## THE CHOPIN NOCTURNE

On Sunday Sasha took Inna to the club.

"Go without me," she had begged. "I'd rather stay home and read. I've got a new number of *Novy Mir*. I've had my fill of clubs in Moscow. All I want is the quiet rustic life—dressing-gown, fire-light, and a free-thought novel. I want to be like Pushkin's Tatyana."

"Too late," said Sasha. "You're 'pledged to another' and 'to him will e'er be true.' And tonight he's going to take you into the wild whirl of society."

"And what are tonight's big features?"

"First a lecture on the art of being well dressed.... What's wrong with that?"

Inna was convulsed with silent laughter.

"Oh, darling, must I really go? What if I'm suddenly taken with a fit or something?"

Sasha sniffed disapprovingly.

"You needn't laugh. It's going to be interesting, with slides showing the latest Czechoslovak styles."

As they made their way to the club Sasha spoke incessantly.

"It makes you sick, Inna. Most people are born with good taste and an instinctive sense of what is harmonious. Look at them at work—nothing offends the eye—their overalls, kerchiefs, even their quilted jackets. But on Sundays, trying to keep up with some outlandish 'fashion', they doll themselves up fit to kill, and turn out simply monsters. High boots wrinkled round their ankles, long shapeless coats, and the inevitable white silk scarf trailing almost to the ground. And the girls with their mediaeval ruffles and propellers for hats. Disgusting. That's why we've started a good taste campaign."

"Who is 'we'?"

"The club management."

"Are you a member of the management?"

"Certainly. Look, Inna. That's what we've declared war on."

He pointed to the window of one of the houses where, through the parted curtains, could be glimpsed

a red-white-and-blue clay dog with a fiercely coquettish smile on its face.

The club was crowded. People clapped Sasha on the back, wrung his hand and said "Greetings, doc!" "Evening, Sasha!" Boris and Timosha came over to them.

"You're holding back on that wedding feast, youngsters," said Boris reproachfully.

"No, we're not," said Inna. "We'll have the wedding celebration and my farewell party at the same time."

Boris grinned at Timosha.

"Learn from them how to economise, Timosha!"

"They've got to economise. They've started family life," retorted Timosha.

Sasha left his wife in a front-row seat, explaining that great responsibilities required his presence backstage. Inna asked if he was to be dancing master.

"A carnation in your buttonhole, hair parted in the middle, 'Gentlemen, invite the ladies! Step right out on to the floor!' Simply too sweet! The role suits you to a T."

Sasha gave a nervous laugh and disappeared. Presently, through an opening in the curtain, Inna caught a glimpse of her husband in animated conversation with Dasha Guryanova, who looked like a Russian doll in a long and voluminous skirt and with a *kokoshnik* on her head. Inna's heart took a leap and something wicked stirred in her breast. The girl's

cheeks are too red—she rouges them of course, she thought, but the next instant she laughed at herself, murmured, what awful nonsense! and fixed her attention on the stage.

The audience listened politely to the lecture, but could not resist making cutting remarks when the slides were shown.

"As if I'd ever put myself into a bob-tailed thing like that!" said a bearded man sitting behind Inna when a man's knee-length coat was shown.

"The general tendency," impassively explained the teacher who had given the lecture, "is away from gaudy colours and towards simple and comfortable styles."

"See that? You don't get the tendency, Tikhon," whispered a voice that must have belonged to the bearded man's wife.

Inna stole a glance at them and was struck by the look of grave concentration in the woman's eyes.

The lecture was followed by a programme of entertainment. Sasha kept coming out on the stage, now to announce the next number, now, with a beard glued to his chin, to play the professor-father of a delinquent son in a short sketch, now to recite poetry. His lean figure seemed unnaturally tall and comical on that tiny stage, but to Inna's surprise the audience laughed only when they were supposed to. Inna suddenly felt proud of her husband. She had recently learned that the stage was his secret passion. He

told her that in his first year of Medical School he had longed to be an actor, spent all his free time in the theatre, got jobs as a super or a stagehand, and even contemplated giving up medicine for the stage. Well, thought Inna with a smile, he certainly wasn't a hot-shot actor, it certainly wasn't that that made her proud of him.

Sasha recited poetry, Timosha played dreamy waltzes on the accordion, Dasha sang folk songs, Boris and a girl (who, somebody whispered, was a plasterer) did acrobatic stunts. Then Sasha came to the edge of the stage and announced in a loud voice:

"The next number on the programme is a Chopin nocturne. . . ."

Gosh! thought Inna.

". . . played by Inna Zelenina!"

She did not instantly grasp who Inna Zelenina was, and when the realisation came, she gasped and her heart turned over. The next moment she was furious with Sasha, stamped her foot and turned away, but the audience received the announcement with such enthusiasm that there was nothing for it but to go up on the stage. She never remembered how she got there and sat down at the piano, but in doing so she caught a passing glimpse of Sasha's apologetic smile and she hissed at him:

"I'll never forgive you for this!"

After that she saw nothing but the keys. Then even the keys vanished and what she saw was seen by

her alone. She was transported to a world created by her own fancy. She was unaware of the two hundred eyes fixed on her and of the tall thin youth in a black suit standing pale with agitation and with clenched fists. When she was brought back to earth by a burst of applause she bowed awkwardly and ran behind scenes. Sasha crossed the whole length of the stage to reach her side.

"Are you angry with me? Try to understand, darling—"

"Go away!" she snapped, and sat down with her back to him.

Sasha walked round and sat down on the floor opposite her but at a little distance.

"Forgive me," he implored. "I wanted so badly to hear you play and I knew this was my only chance. And besides. . . ." He stopped and nodded in the direction of the audience. "Don't they deserve to hear Chopin?"

"Come here," said Inna hoarsely, and when he did so she laughed and tweaked his ear.

"I love you a thousand times more than ever before," exclaimed the delighted Sasha.

Oh, these farewells! How can people bear them? How can they laugh and tell jokes five minutes before parting? Why are they ashamed to cry? It's easier to cry than to laugh when you're saying good-bye. The performance is as unfeeling as the headlight on

the Murmansk express tearing through the darkness, ripping love in two. Half for you, half for her, to remember each other by. The last few minutes are the worst, when people stop making so much noise. That's when one has to take a tight hold of oneself.

"Don't forget to go and see my folks."

"Have no fear. I'll send you a wire from Moscow."

"Everything'll be all right, Inna."

"What?"

"Keep your chin up, darling. We'll soon. . . ."

"Soon?"

"Time flies, you know."

"It's flying now. Good-bye."

And everything was over.

Feet in woollen socks and nylon stockings protruded out into the aisle.

"Spades . . . clubs. . . ." Snores and a smacking of lips. Through the cloud of anguish that had settled down on the whole world, hard little words began to assail her. "What? Bedding? Oh, yes, if you please. Sorry, I have no change. Tea? Yes, I'll have a glass, thank you."

Darkness outside. One might suppose the train was roaring and shaking without moving ahead, were it not for the occasional lights springing out of the night and vaulting backwards into the darkness like sparks from the locomotive. Like the last words of farewell.

## Chapter X
## MARCH, THE MONTH OF DECISIONS

At a Komsomol meeting of the Medico-Hygiene Administration, the case of young Dr. Stolbov, a Komsomol member, was being considered. The small hall was crowded to capacity with young doctors, nurses, laboratory assistants, ambulance drivers, and members of fumigation teams. They had just listened to the speech of Stolbov, who was accused of having disgraced his profession and having taken a bribe. Silence reigned. The people gathered there felt nothing but contempt and aversion for this strapping young man who behaved like a teen-age pickpocket. First he whined and made excuses for himself and asked for mercy, then, possessed of some evil spirit, he grew arrogant, began laughing and talking defiantly. When he had worn himself out he sat down, and then he looked beaten, pathetic, and almost human. It was painful to look at him. Especially for Max and Vladka. They knew him better than any of the others did—they had spent six years at Medical School with him. The others accepted him as just another bribe-taker.

"Does anyone else wish to speak?" came a voice from the presidium.

Dr. Dumpfer, member of the Party Bureau, got up. He half-closed his eyes as was his custom, and this gave his face the mask-like expression of a monk.

"Comrades," he began, "you have shown vigour and principle in discussing the case of Dr. Stolbov. You have gone into all the facts of the case, but has it struck you that they are not the most important thing? These facts are material for the investigator to work on. The important thing is: how could a young doctor and Komsomol member like Dr. Stolbov have fallen so low? Do you mean to say he went bad the minute he began working for our Administration? There are some of his class-mates present here tonight, no doubt they are going over in their minds his behaviour in the past and trying to draw conclusions. I don't know what they are remembering, but here in my hand I have various recommendations that were given to Stolbov. They paint him as an ideal representative of the younger generation: 'Modest, considerate, full of initiative, with a sound political outlook.' He has been a Komsomol member since his second year in Medical School. I would like to have been present at the session of the Komsomol Committee when he was accepted as a member and heard what they talked to him about, what questions they put to him."

Vladka cleared his throat uneasily.

"What's that?" asked Dumpfer, putting a hand to his ear.

"Nothing," murmured Vladka. "They just asked him about rules and regulations, nothing else."

"Just as I thought," exclaimed Dumpfer, and raised

a warning finger. "And see what comes of it, comrades! All a person has to do is memorise the rules and regulations and the doors to membership in the Komsomol are thrown wide open to him! Nobody cares about his genuine thoughts and feelings, about his true outlook. I do not wish to urge any action in this particular case, I only want to make you feel the necessity of being more serious and exacting in matters concerning the Komsomol."

He paused before sitting down and looked about the room for Max.

"I'd like to say a few words about another one of your members," he said.

Max went cold and clenched his fingers.

"About Dr. Maximov. The Party organisation knows he was subjected to all sorts of pressure including threats. And it is a source of great satisfaction that he disregarded them and fulfilled his duty as a Komsomol despite everything."

A gleam suddenly came into Dumpfer's eyes. Max said to himself: That's what Sasha will look like when he's old. Again Dumpfer dropped his lids, shutting out the light. Max gave a little laugh and whispered to Vladka:

"No doubt the old geezer thinks it's his preaching made me do it."

Without replying, Vladka passed him a slip of paper. It was from Valya, the chief's secretary, and read:

"Hello, boys. Both of you are to report at the Personnel Department at five o'clock. Your question is to be decided."

Why is it people like to make decisions in March? Is it the weather that affects them? The scent of spring? In March the pages of the calendar flutter. In March navigation opens up and frantic efforts are made to finish the year's first quarter in triumph. In March results are tabulated and changes awaited. In March decisions are made.

"And so, Dr. Maximov, your time has come at last. Are you glad?"

"Very."

"The head doctor tells us you'd like to be assigned to the . . . the. . . ."

"The *Novator* if you have no objections."

"Oh, yes. I forgot you'd taken that ship under your wing. Trofimov, take a look—where's the *Novator* at present?"

"The *Novator* . . . *Novator* . . . here it is. Just left Calcutta for Vladivostok. It's to be laid up there for repairs."

"Well, go and have your papers made out and get your money, Dr. Maximov. Here's wishing you a happy voyage."

"Thank you. Good-bye."

As Max was going down the stairs he suddenly shouted "Whoopee!", took the last five steps in one leap and found himself in the entrance hall. One

chap ducked out of his way, another tapped his forehead, while Max, no longer "coldly aloof", had all he could do to keep himself from making his exit at a gallop.

No sooner was he outside than Vladka swooped down on him.

Vladka, it turned out, was to board a ship in Murmansk.

*One of our buddies will leave for the north,*
*Another will leave for the east...*

sang Vladka, gazing at his friend with a sudden surge of feeling. Max, too, felt a pang.

Smoking may be a bad habit, but at times it saves one's face—even if the first ten matches refuse to light.

"Do you think they'll give us a week off before we set out?"

"If they do, we'll make a flying trip to see Sasha, shall we?" said Vladka.

## REUNION

Max stood impatiently beside the waiting train, glancing now at his watch, now at the crowd. At last he caught sight of an athletic young man with a pair of skis over one shoulder coming towards him. It was Vladka, walking briskly and humming a student song.

As soon as they had stored their skis and knapsacks away on the top bunk, the train started. Max went out on to the car platform.

He opened the door. Swirls of cold air rushed in, engulfing him from head to foot and seeming to lift him off his feet. What strange impressions speed conveys! Take that thin line of birches and aspens retreating at a run while the sun stands over them like the inflamed eye of a general inspecting his troops; change your point of view and the birches and aspens are standing still, while the sun, an enraged beast, races neck-and-neck with the train on the other side of the palings. Or turn your head: in the glass of the open door all that confusion of colour—red, white, blue, green, orange—all that mad medley, is whisked away to the left, and for a moment it seems as if space is being torn in two like a handkerchief while you stand motionless in the middle, engulfed in the deafening roar. But these are fleeting impressions. Man is marvellously wrought: at any moment he can see things in their true light. The sun is neither an eye nor a beast but a star of medium magnitude. The earth is revolving about the sun and on its own axis. The birches and aspens are standing still, and those colours flying off to the left are merely the reflection of the winter sunset distorted in the glass by smears of soot and frost. The train is really moving through space at an average speed of thirty-five miles an hour, and among its four hundred

passengers is a young man trying to decide whether he is happy or unhappy.

Max has never been completely happy. Something has always been lacking. Soon he will fly to Vladivostok, board a ship, see the tropics, practise his profession (according to the high tenets of his friend and teacher, Dr. Dumpfer), write poetry, take photographs, dream of his home-coming.... Is that not happiness? Yes, but ... Vera? If everything were happily settled with Vera, would he then be completely happy? Hardly. He would be sure to find something else lacking. A person can never be completely happy because he must always be aspiring towards something beyond his reach.

Max threw away his cigarette, slammed the door shut, stood for a moment in the glowing twilight of the platform, and went back into the car. He saw a number of people grouped about Vladka's bunk. Heard the twang of a guitar. Vladka was singing *On the Petrograd Side*. Beside him was sitting the girl who served as porter in their car. She was fat, with straw-coloured hair and blue eyes.

"Max!" Vladka called out, "take a look at this child of the fjords. Ever seen anything like her? A girl from the northlands. Could your name be Solveig, my dear?"

"Oh, you!" and the girl blushed and ran away.

There was no railroad platform at the little country station, so the two boys with knapsacks on their backs

and skis in their hands had to jump off the train like paratroopers out of an aeroplane. They were waved at and called to by their new-made friends inside the train—miners from the Donbas who were going to work in Spitsbergen. Beside them stood the fat porter with her yellow signal flag. Sadly she watched her two boisterous passengers jump out without so much as glancing back at her. It was always like that.

The train clanked its couplings, clicked its wheels, thrust its head into the woods, shrieked out a farewell, switched its tail, and was gone. A gust of wind followed in its wake. The friends looked about them. Some three dozen log huts with wisps of grey smoke rising out of their chimneys were grouped about the log station. The horizon line was fretted by the fir forest that stretched on every hand in all its grandeur. Into this forest went the deeply furrowed road.

The friends pushed back their caps, shouldered their skis, and went slipping and sliding in their heavy boots towards the station. The crash of their dropped knapsacks woke up the man drowsing behind the lunch-counter. A dirty quilted jacket showed under his white smock, and his little eyes glistened dully among a week's growth of beard. The counter still bore the traces of last year's flies. A few bottles of champagne and two or three tins of fish were all the glass cases displayed.

"Where you from and where you going, buddies?" the man asked, staring at them suspiciously.

"We're from Chastaya Pila, daddy," said Max.

"Ah. How's things there?"

"What?"

"Shops full of goods?"

"Bursting. Listen, daddy, maybe you'll make us a glass of tea and dig up some sausage, eh? When will the bus be leaving for Kruglogorye?"

The man explained that the bus wouldn't come for at least an hour and would wait at the station another half-hour before turning back.

"The road's crumby. But there's all you could wish at Kruglogorye. Plenty of butter and sugar. Shipped straight through us without touching us. There's a construction job under way there."

The boys decided to follow the road on skis until the bus overtook them.

They had been skiing for over three hours without coming to a single break in the forest. The boughs of the firs drooped solemnly over their ski-tracks. Firs ... firs ... a mighty tribe in rich green raiment trimmed with ermine, and in their midst, like poor relations, the shivering aspens and birches. From time to time the forest turned to follow the line of a gully with a frozen stream at the bottom. Then Vladka would increase his speed, turn off the road, and whizz down, expertly avoiding the trees.

Max, who was not as skilful as Vladka, was by this time tired of the skiing and the silence, and longed for the sight of another human being. Just then,

against the background of the forest, he caught the glint of a red-and-yellow bus-stop sign—the calling-card of civilisation.

"I'm through," he said, thrusting his sticks into the snow. " 'Let the snow cover my frozen remains, and tell my dear wife her name was on my lips.' " He leaned gratefully against the post. Men like himself had chopped this pole, barked it, and planted it here. No doubt they had talked and smoked *makhorka* as they worked.

"Tired, hero?" asked Vladka. "Then look about for a house. If there's a bus stop there must be a house."

"Fee, fie, fo, fum, I smell a smell," said Max, sniffing the air. "Cabbage soup."

"Pickled herring," groaned Vladka.

"Vodka."

"Who do you suppose lives here? Maybe it's—you know, with horns and a tail."

"I'll risk it," cried Max.

From behind a bend in the road came a closed truck. It was proceeding slowly, dipping in and out of the ruts in the road like a ship on a high sea. The boys waved their mittens and ski-sticks. When the truck came abreast of them the driver opened the door and stared without speaking.

"Headed for Kruglogorye by any chance?" asked Max.

"No, for Crystal Promontory." The expression of

the driver's face told of a struggle being waged between his curiosity and a desire not to lose his dignity.

"Too bad."

"Why? Climb in, I'll drop you off."

He himself climbed out, stamped about in the snow a bit, and when the boys had ensconced themselves in the back of the lorry, asked in a casual tone:

"Sent here to hold propaganda meetings?"

"Oh, no, we're doctors."

"I see," said the driver as if that made everything clear, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to find doctors skiing in pairs through this remote forest.

The truck set out briskly over the ruts. The boys, convulsed with laughter, were tossed about on the full sacks lying on the floor. All unexpectedly the road smoothed out. Vladka crawled to the opening in the back and saw an enormous quarry down below with great mounds of yellow sand, people, trucks and bulldozers at work.

The car dashed ahead at reckless speed and in an hour and a half they were in Kruglogorye. The car came to a halt. The driver's rosy face with a cigarette between his teeth peered into the opening.

"Station 'All Out'," he said. "Have you come to see Sasha?"

"See who?"

"Er ... Sasha, that doctor of ours up at the hospital."

"Do you know him?"

"Who doesn't?"

Max and Vladka sprang down.

"It's not far from here. Advise you to take a short cut over the ice. The hospital's in that birch grove over there."

Max held out a ten-ruble bill. The driver gave it a sidelong glance, spat out his cigarette, and strode over to the cab.

"Bah, you medics," he said with disgust.

Max cleared his throat, folded up the bill and for some crazy reason pushed it into Vladka's pocket.

The sky above Kruglogorye was clear except for a few wisps of cloud which, like little boats, were scurrying northward as if to catch up with the mighty armada that had just withdrawn. An invigorating wind was whistling through the telegraph wires and bending the tops of the fir-trees. The sun, slipping down behind an old church on a hill, formed a halo of mysterious light. Long rays fell upon the graveyard, whose crosses seemed made of tin foil and to shake in the wind.

The boys walked along the board footpath, glancing with interest from side to side, rousing the curiosity of the few people they met. They were stared at and whispered about and when they climbed down on to the ice of the lake they were followed by a group of small boys.

It was at just this moment that Sasha set out on

his skis over the ice. He had made a habit of skiing alone every day, and each time he descended the steep embankment he felt a gnawing loneliness. More than a month had passed since Inna had left and he still could not get used to being without her. Now everything—his apartment, books, skis, the club—reminded him of his wife, as if he and she had spent a long life together. He worked mechanically, saw little of his friends, and tried to be alone as much as possible so as to recall another word, another gesture, another glance. Again his life hung on letters and telephone calls, sad substitutes for the living presence. He lost weight, smoked without end, sat alone in silence dreaming and remembering.

Now as he sped over the worn ski-tracks he fastened his eyes on the ground and saw Inna's yellow skis with the black edging. He stopped, took off his cap, and turned his face to the wind.

Two people with skis over their shoulders were walking over the ice near the shore. Sasha was standing in shadow, these two were walking at the edge of the golden nimbus, their figures casting long black shadows on the ice. They were young; their step was light and springy. They were gay; one of them slapped the other on the back and he crouched for a moment as if bent over with laughter. They were not local fellows, they looked too smart (tight ski-pants, fur-lined leather jackets, caps with long visors). They were.... Sasha let out a whoop, threw

his cap high into the air, and rushed towards them without bothering to catch the cap.

Vladka got up, adjusted an imaginary tie, switched the tails of an imaginary frock-coat, flicked an imaginary speck off his shoulder, and began a speech:

"Gentlemen! You, our esteemed host Alexandro Kruglogorsky, and you, Maximillian the Third, reigning lord of Chastaya Pila, dread enemy of warehouse vermin, and I, your humble servant, Vladislav Nobilissimus—shut up, Max!—at this solemn moment I urge you to exercise the supreme heroism of withdrawing your greedy gaze from this historic board laden with ham, lobsters, sprats, Burgundy and Kakhetinsky, and turn said gaze into the past as well as into the future, for ... can't you give a guy a chance to have his say, you slobs?"

"Shut your trap," said Max threateningly.

"Here's to our friendship, fellows," said Sasha, getting up.

"Vivat!" they all cried, relieved that Sasha had stated their common sentiment simply, without facetious embellishment.

Sasha quietly told Max about his life in Kruglogorye (Vladka had gone outside "to cool off").

"You were right about one thing, Max," he said. "A person ought to live to capacity—get as many revolutions out of the engine as possible. But the im-

portant thing is to direct this energy to the right object. I don't pretend that everything has become clear to me, but I'm sure of one thing: I intend always to live among ordinary people and for their sake. The months I've spent here have been a sort of experiment. Are you laughing?"

"Not I," said Max.

"Of course I'm lonely now and long for Inna, but at times I almost tremble with a sense of happiness. I can't explain it to you. Especially to you. You're sure to mock me for my high-sounding phrases, but I can't put what I feel in any other sort of phrases."

"You're wrong if you think I'll laugh at you. I've been doing a little experimenting myself, only along different lines. And it looks as if I'm beginning to learn the A B C's of what's what, even if I am ten years late. Cynicism is a very comfortable suit of armour, Sasha, and it's hard to put it aside. But evidently the time comes when a person finds he's had enough of just looking on. You, for instance, are happy because you've slipped like a bolt into the very centre of this complicated mechanism we call life. Am I right?"

"Yes," said Sasha. He was surprised and pleased by his friend's words. Evidently Max had taken a knock or two since he'd last seen him. "I'm glad you've come to understand."

"Quit it," said Max roughly. "There's lots I don't

understand and probably never will. Sometimes I'm seized by a humiliating fit of panic."

"All of us are," said Sasha, "but we've got the courage to face up to it."

"What's the good of our courage? What's the good of all our noble qualities? There's a place in Anatole France's *Revolt of the Angels* . . . somebody strikes a match and looks at the flame and thinks: perhaps there's a million galaxies in that flame, an incalculable number of stars and planets where civilisations rise and fall and millions of years pass by. In a second the match goes out—a cosmic cataclysm for those worlds. Can you grasp that, Sasha? It's so far beyond my comprehension that it makes me go cold all over."

Somebody laughed. Falteringly, hesitatingly at first, then in wild unrestrained peals.

"Damn it all, you are a case, Max!" gasped Sasha. "What do you expect people to do—lie down and contemplate their navels and groan over the mysteries of life?"

For the first time the tables were turned and Sasha was laughing at Max. Incredible. Max cleared his throat apologetically and said:

"I suppose it sounds crazy. Stupid and absurd and selfish as hell. Not in the contemporary spirit. But I can't help it. There's a struggle going on inside of me."

"Hey, you smug burghers!" Vladka called out as

he entered the room and struck a match. "Gone to bed already? On a night like this?"

"What do you propose?" asked Max. .

"I propose that our Light Brigade make a sally into the surrounding woods and sing a serenade to the Snow Queen. After which we go fishing through a hole in the ice."

"Good idea," exclaimed Max and began pulling on his jacket.

It was a fairy-tale night, with blue-white daubed thickly on a black background. It struck them in the eye when they stepped out on to the porch, and drew them irresistibly into its depths. In a minute their eyes became adjusted and they could make out the abstract patterns of moonlight on snow, the fine spray of stars, the silhouettes of houses. Max drank in deep breaths of air, aware of the mysterious, indefinable scent of spring. He felt the profundity of the night, the vastness of the earth, the imminence of spring and of love. He knew he was about to set out on a long voyage, and all this taken together filled him with a sense of youth and strength.

## COLLEAGUES

Sasha came in when they were having breakfast at eleven o'clock the next morning. He had risen at seven as usual and had already made his rounds at the hospital.

"Hello," he said. "What are your plans?"

"Skiing of course."

"I envy you. I've got to receive out-patients."

"Humph!" grunted Vladka, who had not had his fill of sleep.

Sasha shifted from one foot to the other, cleared his throat and sighed.

"Some of my patients are interesting cases," he said.

"Pass me the butter, Vladka," said Max.

"With queer complications."

"What's that—sardines? Let's have them."

"Any doctor worth his salt would want to take a look at them."

"Sardines taste best with lots of butter on your bread."

"Ivan Klimakov, for instance. A very strange urine analysis and no symptoms to bear it out."

"Pour me out some tea, Vladka—good and strong."

"Very strange urine," sighed Sasha hopelessly.

"Perhaps you'll serve us up a lecture on dysentery with our tea?" said the indignant Vladka.

"What is it you're getting at, Lancelot? Out with it!" said Max.

"I thought. . ." began Sasha uncertainly; then, as if taking his courage in his hands: "Wouldn't you like to examine my patients with me? Hold a sort of consultation of big specialists from Leningrad, eh? You, Max, as an endocrinologist—you used to be

good at it; and you, Vladka, as a high-powered surgeon and urologist."

"How's that for nerve?" exclaimed Vladka. "Such familiarity: 'Max' and 'Vladka'. I look upon it as brazen exploitation of chance visitors."

"Come, now, it's not quite that bad," began Sasha.

"It might be amusing," said Max.

"It would," Sasha assured him. "Really it would. You'd like to, wouldn't you?"

"What about fees?" asked Vladka, winking at Max. Sasha blinked.

"Fees? Oh, we'll pay you, of course. I hadn't thought of it." Then, catching on: "I'll go straight to the book-keeper and have him open a special account for you."

Vladka burst out laughing.

"God knows why I should be so fond of that idiot of a Sasha!"

Nurses and hospital attendants were sent to the town for patients, and soon the waiting-room was filled with all of Kruglogorye's "problem cases". As the boys crossed the yard they were still teasing Sasha about "spiders that crouch in the backwoods and lure learned flies into their clutches", but when they reached the ante-room and saw the people waiting for them they grew sober at once. Medicine is no joke. They put on white coats and took seats round the table. At first Dr. Karpov could not tear

his eyes off Dasha's face, but at last he pulled himself together and began studying case histories. Dr. Maximov frantically searched his mind for everything he had ever heard or read about endocrinology. He had had no use for such knowledge during his work in the port.

Dr. Zelenin was happy. He addressed his friends by their proper titles, gave them detailed accounts of each case, told them the conclusions he himself had drawn, and watched with bated breath while the visiting doctors examined his patients. Then followed discussion. They argued over every case till they were blue in the face, with the result that much became clear to Dr. Zelenin that had puzzled him before. One mind is good, three are better.

They examined all the problem cases that day. Their further programme, as mapped out by Dr. Zelenin, consisted of skiing to the outlying kolkhozes, lumber camps, and construction site.

"We'll combine duty and pleasure," he said.

"A diagnostic ski-run," laughed Max.

On the evening of their third day in Kruglogorye they were returning from a trip to Ghim Lake. Since they were retracing their own ski-tracks they were able to make good time. Vladka, as usual, was in the lead; the others followed, keeping in time with the swing of his sticks and his energetic stride. Not a sound was to be heard except the creaking of their

skis on the snow and the click of their ski-clamps. Wider and wider grew the breaks in the trees, giving glimpses of pale-blue sky, until at last they came out upon a wind-swept hill that dropped sheerly into a valley where Kruglogorye lay steeped in the faint light of the declining day. The town was a tiny dot in an enormous expanse of snow. The friends stopped on the top of the hill. The thought of plunging immediately, without consideration, down that steep drop was breath-taking.

"What do you bet I make it without falling?" asked Vladka.

Sasha touched Max on the shoulder.

"How does it make you feel, Max?"

"What?"

"All this. The northlands of Mother Rus."

Max shrugged his shoulders and gave a little laugh.

"You know me—the prosaic city-dweller, lover of wet bystreets and up-to-date beer parlours."

"Take a look at that," and Sasha pointed his stick at a church on a near-by hill. Its tall white walls, with patches of brickwork showing through in places, rose in unbroken vertical planes ending in severely simple round arches. Max caught his breath. He was seized by an unfamiliar agitation, the call of his ancestors in his blood, and as if in the flesh he seemed to see warriors with their hair hanging down in straight locks, women with black circles under their

sunken eyes, men in bast sandals and with the savage look born of their cruel struggle for existence, making their way up the hill to throw themselves at the feet of their relentless god.

"Weak in the knees, Max? Take inspiration from me!" cried out Vladka as he pushed himself over the brink.

"How do you like it?" asked Sasha, turning to Max. "Thrilling, isn't it? What harmony of line! And you ought to see the frescoes inside."

"That *is* something," breathed Max. "But don't you find the picture spoiled by details like that?" and he pointed in the direction of Crystal Promontory, where rows of barracks huddled against the earth and three cranes rose over the forest.

Sasha laughed.

"Come back in three years and all that will be changed."

Max glanced at him.

"I will."

Three years, he thought. In three years you yourself will have forgotten this part of the country, my dear Lancelot. Three years! By that time you'll have entered graduate school and that'll be that.

A miniature Vladka was waving to them from the valley below. Sasha moved to the edge of the hill, but Max went on gazing at the church. He was loth to leave this hill, to part with these vast spaces, this profound simplicity. He swept the horizon with his

eyes, and the thought that he would not see it in spring, in summer, and again in winter, filled him with sadness. Perhaps in three years...? Who could tell?

After the evening meal the three friends remained in the dining-room. Max and Sasha playing chess, Vladka tuning his guitar and humming to himself as he sat on the floor beside the stove.

"We might take in a movie," he suggested.

"A dance instead of a movie at the club tonight," said Sasha. "I'd rather stay home and listen to the radio. They're broadcasting a Festival programme from Moscow."

"Sounds wonderful," said Vladka. "Let's go to the dance."

Sasha looked up.

"You haven't brought a suit with you. You can't go to a dance in a sweater."

"White tie and tails required here?"

"They'll let you in, but how will you feel?"

"Die of shame, of course."

Sasha was angry.

"So you think anything goes in the country? Would you go to a dance in ski-boots if you were in Leningrad?"

"My God! Anybody'd think you'd been born in Kruglogorye!"

"In three years Sasha will be giving lectures on etiquette in the local club," laughed Max good-naturedly.

"And why not?" asked Sasha. "In three years this will be a big town."

"Castles in the air, Sasha," said Vladka.

"And where will you be in three years?" asked Max. "Here or somewhere else?"

Sasha got up, crossed the room, glanced out of the window, turned and faced his comrades:

"I don't know," he said. "I'm gathering some very interesting data—seems I'm on the trail of a research problem. I'll write it up and then we'll see what happens. If I'm needed somewhere else more than I am here, I'll leave; if not, I'll be only too glad to stay. I've come to love this place. You're laughing at me, thinking to yourself: isn't he the goody-goody, the ideal we read about in the newspapers! Well, go ahead and laugh. As I see it, this is the only way to live. Find your place in the ranks, feel that you're marching shoulder to shoulder with your fellow-men, go on dreaming, working, loving.... What else can a person do in our age?"

"Drink, row, deceive, kill, get rich by speculating," said Max.

"That's not of our age," exclaimed Sasha. "That's something of the past—a slimy hang-over that sinks its teeth and claws in to keep from being cast off."

Max nodded: Sasha *would* take it to heart like that.

"We belong to the age of socialism," began Sasha, but at that point he was interrupted by a knock at the door. Dasha came in.

"You're wanted down on the fire-boat, Alexander Dmitrievich. Her time's come," she said.

Sasha jerked up the zipper on his jacket.

"Damn it all!" he muttered. "Got to go."

"Where to?"

"Down to the dock, blast it. One of the boat-hands is giving birth. What's the joke? Why, can't a boat-hand be a woman? And the baby's in the wrong position. Won't be easy."

"Why didn't you put her in the hospital?" asked Vladka.

"She refused. Said her husband wouldn't let her, the dope!"

He and Dasha went out. He called in at the hospital for his bag and told Dasha to join him as soon as she saw the lying-in patients settled for the night. He pulled on his fur cap, threw the strap of his bag over his shoulder, and went out into the yard. Twilight had settled on the earth and the sky was a pale disturbing green. Overhead the first star quivered at the touch of a light wind. Sasha paused to gaze up at the sky and was reminded, for some reason, of Blok's poem about the city awaiting in fearful expectancy the arrival of mysterious ships. As

he heaved a sigh he noticed Max standing on the porch.

"What is it, Max?"

"Wouldn't you like me to go with you?"

"Think I can't handle the case alone?"

"Yes, you can, but it might be more cheerful."

"Thanks, but you take a rest. Tomorrow we've got that long run over to Zhuravliniye."

"Let me come along. You know—"

"Forget it," Sasha said abruptly and made for the gate.

Max went back into the dining-room. Vladka was sitting on the sofa lighting a cigarette.

"Where will we all be ten days from now?"

He went over, switched on the radio and turned the dial until he got Moscow. Sounds from the Large Hall of the Conservatory were carried to them—coughing, a rustle of programmes, a hum of conversation.

"We are about to begin the final concert of the Festival series," came the announcer's voice. "Tonight you will hear amateur performances by Moscow students."

A pause.

"The first number is a Chopin nocturne played by Inna Zelenina, student of Moscow University."

Max gasped, Vladka jumped up.

"Sasha! Where's Sasha, damn it all?"

"Sh-h!"

Sasha went down to the dock. Abandoned, hemmed in by great snowbanks, it looked forlorn. Some fifty yards from shore loomed the dark forms of barges frozen into the ice for the winter. Sasha decided to take a short cut past the warehouses that would bring him out on to the well-worn path over the ice to the fire-boat.

The silence was so profound that he felt as if his ears were stuffed with cotton. To free himself of this sensation he concentrated all his attention on the creaking of the snow under his feet. Presently he was aware of another sound, a sound of snoring. Watchman Lukonya, wrapped in a voluminous sheepskin, was sitting with his back against the wall of one of the warehouses, his head hanging limply over one shoulder and his mouth gaping like a black hole in his white beard.

Drunk again, said Sasha to himself. He thought of waking him up, but realising the man would only fall asleep again the minute he was gone, he walked past without disturbing him and turned the corner of the building. Now he heard another sound—the stealthy click of metal against metal. A sound of thieving. A cowardly sound, yet full of menace. Keep away! Sasha quickened his steps and saw two figures busily at work at the door of the warehouse. The yellow light of a lantern revealed an enormous padlock.

You're going on a call, a woman is in labour, you're needed, he admonished himself; and nevertheless he called out, shuddering, as if his very muscles were aware of his loneliness.

"Who's there?"

The two figures darted in different directions—one round the corner of the building, the other down the embankment at the edge of the lake. Hardly aware of what he was doing, Sasha ran after the second of the two. He had difficulty in making his way through the deep snow, and soon the man he was chasing reached a spot on the ice cleared of snow by the wind.

He'll get away, thought Sasha. I'd better go straight to the fire-boat and send someone from there to tell the militia.

But the man had stopped for some reason and turned round. The moonlight threw his figure into full relief. Sasha recognised the massive square shoulders and belligerent bearing of Fyodor Bugrov. Fyodor looked round, struck a match, lit a cigarette, and sauntered towards him.

The foetus is in an abnormal position—that's serious. You'd better drop this and be on your way. Catching thieves is not your job.

With trembling fingers he pulled his scarf tighter, took so deep a breath of the cold air that it seemed to penetrate to his very finger-tips, and went to meet Fyodor.

"Stand where you are, Bugrov," he said when he had almost reached him. "I mean to turn you over to the watchman."

"You don't say!" replied Fyodor, heaving a mock sigh. "Looks like there's no way out—have to give myself up."

Sasha got a whiff of vodka-tainted breath as Fyodor came toward him and, with a fierce swing of his arm, struck him on the temple. When his victim was down he kicked him in the face and jumped back. Sasha lay writhing in the snow. A red film covered his eyes and he heard a voice that seemed to come from some towering height say:

"That's in payment for the waltz, remember? Now get up and beat it, you bastard, and if you breathe a word of this to anyone I'll smash you for good."

Sasha got up. He made for Fyodor. The latter retreated, muttering:

"Go away. Go away. Don't tempt me."

"I'll show you, you stinker," hissed Sasha, and punched him in the face.

After that they rolled in a ball in the snow until Fyodor, finding an advantageous moment, kicked Sasha away and both of them sprang to their feet.

"Run!" roared Fyodor. Reeling like a drunken man, Sasha made for him again. Fyodor reached for his boot-top and rushed forward with a knife in his hand.

Sasha opened his mouth without uttering a sound, put his hands to his belly and stretched taut as a

string in the last instant before falling. An enormous soundless explosion had taken place inside him. A slow thought formed in his mind: Is this an atom bomb? Then he fell. Thick red smoke billowed upward, condensed, expanded in waves. It was followed by a downpour of photographs: Inna, his mother, his father, his friends. He tried to catch at least one of them, but the red waves snatched them away.

He had a vision of deep blue sky. Stars glimmered. The tropics? Sea, a sandy beach, palm-trees. Sukhumi? Radio music. Loud-speakers on the beach. A concert. 'Cellos playing. Who are they weeping for? Him? Could they possibly be weeping for him, for his youth, for his departure from this world?

The sky darkened, descended, blotted him out.

Lukonya never did find out why he woke up. He yawned. Walked the length of the warehouse, turned the corner. Wiped his nose with a handful of snow, looked out over the lake. Two drunks seemed to be having a fight out there. Lukonya was interested.

Look at that now, look at that! he muttered to himself.

One of the drunks fell down, the other bent over him, turned him over, and took to his heels. He ran in long strides—falling, crawling, running again. The first lay without moving.

"Foul play!" shouted Lukonya, snatched his gun off his shoulder and clambered down on to the ice.

## Chapter XI
## THEY'VE KILLED SASHA

It is good to see the lights shining in distant windows at night. A person may fight for his life alone in the night, but he must always remember the kindly lights shining for him in those distant windows. Otherwise what is there to fight for? And as he perishes in the night, coughing and spitting out blood, he sends the last spark of his dying consciousness out to those shining windows, the windows of his mother, brother, sweetheart, friends, the welcoming windows of the whole world.

While Sasha was fighting with Fyodor, his friends were listening to the radio.

"Too bad Inna didn't have Sasha among her audience," said Max when the concert was over.

"He's on duty tonight," said Vladka.

"He's on duty every night."

Vladka touched the strings of his guitar and began to sing, which was a sign for Max to light up. Both of them were touched by a familiar sadness; they were conscious of their impending separation, and of something else, vague and indefinable. What was it? A wind from the steppe? The scent of spring?

Hands off, leave me alone, I'm going away. I'm going out to the fields, along the highway, over the marsh to the mountains, and from there to the sea.

I'm going to hail cars on the open road, going to set sail, to go hungry, to meet strangers, new girls. Hands off, leave me alone!

*Give me in parting a railway ticket*
*To some far-distant place.*
*I care not where, if only the train*
*Covers a lot of space.*

When heated discussions about the future and the meaning of life peter out, when jackets and uniforms are buttoned up and the drowsiness of wine goes padding about in soft felt boots, then someone is sure to pick up a guitar and sing in a deep bass voice, and once more everyone feels young and adventurous.

*Ah, that I never had kissed the face,*
*The eyes, the lips of my friend!*
*Now all I want is a long, long road,*
*A road that has no e-e-end.*

Vladka drew out the last syllable comically, as if to break the tension. He glanced at his friend out of the corner of his eye and saw the look of abstraction on his face, but the shadow of a smile that crossed it spoke Max's gratitude for the song.

He joined Vladka in singing snatches of student songs, old and new, and they had been doing this for some time when the fatal moment came, announced by a slamming of doors, one after another.

Dasha Guryanova rushed into the room in a cloud of frosty vapour.

"Alexander Dmitrievich..." she began, then, with her hands over her mouth, reeled and sank to the floor. Vladka leaped round the table, Max rushed to her side. She opened her eyes and gasped, "They've killed Sasha."

Never in their lives had they run so fast. They ran without speaking, gripped by hope and horror. They had to convince themselves it was all nonsense, a crazy mistake, that Sasha was alive and safe—or at least only injured. Badly injured, perhaps, but certainly not dead. He could not be dead. They ran without noticing that the dark lanes of the town had come to life; here and there people were running, dim circles of pocket torches were leaping about in the dark.

An anxious crowd had gathered at the warehouse. The friends cut through it at full speed. Sasha was lying on top of a heap of sheepskins and quilted jackets. Sasha—or his body. His sunken white face was covered with bruises, there was a jagged cut on his right cheek and his mouth hung open lifelessly.

"It's all over with the doctor," said someone.

"Sasha!" cried Vladka. Dropping to his knees, he seized his friend's hand and felt for the pulse.

"Steady," said Max. "Where did he stab him—in the breast?"

"In the belly," came the answer.

Somebody turned a torch on the body. Max saw the blood-stained hole in Sasha's coat and thought: Perhaps nothing serious would have happened if he'd worn my leather jacket. Then he, too, dropped to his knees, unbuttoned the coat and the jacket underneath and looked at the injury. Vladka sat in the snow weeping womanishly.

"It can't be, it can't be," he kept moaning.

"Is there any pulse?" Max asked sharply. Vladka shook his head. Max took Sasha's hand.

"There is. A faint one," he said.

Why the hell should Vladka get hysterical at a moment like this? A fine surgeon! If anybody could do anything, Vladka could. If he took himself in hand. He was talented. Max recalled the day when he had been chosen from all the other students to perform a major operation. Dr. Kruglov had said that with fingers like Dr. Karpov's. . . .

Funny that one's thoughts should go running off at a moment like this, thought Max. He picked up a handful of snow and rubbed it on his face. Then he shook Vladka by the shoulder.

"What's the diagnosis?"

"The upper abdomen is pierced, probably the stomach, and possibly the right artery has been severed," he replied mechanically.

"We're going to operate," said Max.

Vladka gave a start.

"*We*? Are you mad?"

"The artery has *not* been severed. Stop being a baby—you're the one who's going to do the operating. Is there a cart or a sledge at hand?" he called out. "Here, make way!"

"Is there any hope?" someone in the crowd asked in a hushed voice.

"There is," declared Max.

"There is," murmured Vladka.

Filimon whipped his horse unmercifully. People ran beside the sledge, pushing from behind and pulling the horse by the bridle to help it over the slippery spots.

What the devil has happened to all the cars? thought Max.

Just then the forms of three trucks loomed out of the darkness. People waved their hands excitedly to stop them. There was an interchange of clipped phrases.

"He's hiding in Sevastyan's bath-house."

"He's got a gun."

"Where'd he get it?"

"Took it away from Lukonya."

"He'll pay for this!"

All three cars turned on their headlights at once. The rays picked heads, caps, militia insignia out of the darkness, lay in phosphorescent streaks on the snow, and came to focus on a crooked little hut. The people formed a cordon.

Max nudged Vladka.

"Go on, I'll catch up to you."

"Where are you going?" asked Vladka, but Max had already disappeared. He overtook a man on crutches, ran past him and joined the cordon, which was now advancing through the deep snow.

"Imagine it happening to Sasha!" a young man on his right said in a broken voice.

Max glanced at him. His face seemed familiar.

The people were closing in on the bath-house. When they were less than a hundred yards from it a shot was fired, and in the ensuing silence the hinges of a door were heard to creak. Max saw a tall man with a gun in his hands slip sideways through the door. There he was. The man who had chopped down Sasha's life, who in a single stroke had annihilated his dreams, his plans, his beloved oddities. So this was he. The one who had murdered Sasha's enormous world, ruined Inna's life, delivered a mortal blow to Sasha's parents, made Vladka cry like a baby, turned all the people out of their houses. *He* was the one!

Max dashed round the cordon of people.

I'll kill him. I'll choke him. I'll smash him to bits. I'll trample the life out of him. I'll do it myself—won't let anybody else do it. Oh God! Oh God! As if that could help Sasha any! Yes, it will. It will.

He ran up to Fyodor. The culprit was standing swaying on his feet, whimpering softly. He was holding the gun with both hands, more for support than defence, and when he turned his head Max saw that his lips were quivering, his eyes blinking, his nose running. How repulsive! How contemptible! Wreak vengeance on anything as low as this? What satisfaction could be got out of it?

Max snatched the gun away, tossed it aside, felled Fyodor with three battering blows and threw himself down to roll hysterically in the snow.

The dread of appearing sentimental enables a person to keep himself in hand most of the time, but there are moments when his soul bursts wide open and he is unable to restrain his cries and tears.

Max became aware of feet trampling the snow near by. The cordon was closing in around him and Fyodor.

"We'll get even with him for what he did to the doctor!" shouted someone in the crowd.

Workers, lumberjacks, long-shoremen shook their fists at the murderer.

"Stop! Hands off, Ibraghim! He's to be sent up for trial."

"Trial! We'll do the trying!"

"He may get off with a prison sentence."

"Don't listen to Yegorov!"

"Let him have it!"

"I didn't mean to!" cried Fyodor as he got up off the ground. "I didn't mean to kill him!"

"Knock him down!"

Just then Yegorov and some militiamen pushed their way through the crowd.

"Quiet there," shouted Yegorov. "Have we got judges of our own electing or haven't we?"

Fyodor was led away. Slowly the jabbering crowd dispersed. Max struggled to his feet in the trampled snow, his mind clearing slowly.

Shut up! he said to himself. Clench your teeth and stop whimpering. Shut up—not a word! Rub some snow on your face. Now get going. Snap into it!

Three men were standing beside a truck as if waiting for him. One was the young man whose face seemed familiar, another was the man on crutches, the third was a big fellow.

"Do you think there's any hope for his life?" asked Yegorov in a voice that betrayed his agitation.

"We were told everything was over with him," said the bear. "Me and Boris were coming from the club and all of a sudden somebody comes running up and shouts, 'They've killed Sasha.' "

"Perhaps he'll pull through?" said the chap with the familiar face.

"To the hospital as fast as possible!" said Max under his breath as he climbed into the car.

He was ashamed of himself for having lost hope and surrendered to anger and despair. Perhaps they

could preserve the spark of life still burning within Sasha and blow it into a flame. How long had he lain in the snow? His constitution was fundamentally strong and healthy. Was? Is. Sasha is and will be. They would put up a desperate fight for his life.

## DOCTORS AT WORK

The pride of Sasha's heart was the shadowless lamp which had cost him no little effort to acquire for his little hospital. Now it threw a bright even light on the operating-table. Such equipment inspires confidence in the power of medicine. Vladka was standing solemn and erect beside the table, holding his hands in front of him. Makar Ivanovich was adjusting the blood transfusion apparatus. Dasha was verifying the instruments for the last time. Max came in and took his place opposite Vladka.

"Everything ready, Makar Ivanovich?"

"Yes."

"Shall we begin, Max?"

"Yes."

The four raised their heads and exchanged glances. A spasm passed over their faces, but the next instant they were again impassive. It was as if they had tossed a rope from one to the other and each had tied it tightly round his waist, so that now they

were joined together like mountain climbers storming a peak.

Vladka made an incision. The abdomen was filled with blood. The knife had severed a branch artery and pierced the stomach. Vladka glanced at Max.

"See that?"

Max nodded.

"What is it?" asked Makar Ivanovich and Dasha bent her strained face to see.

"Two centimetres from the right artery," said Vladka. "Give me a ligature."

Perhaps his lying on the snow saved his life, thought Max. Caused the blood-vessels to contract. Saved him? Is he really saved? Will we be able to pull him through? Hold on, Lancelot! You don't exist at present, you're out, but your body exists and you have friends who are going to bring you back. Steady, Vladka's begun sewing up your stomach.

Max watched the long sensitive fingers (a perfect instrument) probing the wound; he followed their every movement. Here he was, Vladka Karpov, surgeon, saving the life of his friend. Here he was, the real Karpov. And here *he* was, Alexei Maximov. Here they both were, doctors, men who could be relied on, good guys.

Suddenly Makar Ivanovich straightened up, stepped to the top of the table and touched Sasha's eyes.

"No pulse," he said. "And his pupils don't react."

The blood rushed to Max's head and things blurred for a moment. He saw the needle in Vladka's fingers tremble. He raised his head and for a second he and Vladka looked each other in the eye without moving.

"Is it all over?" asked Dasha in despair.

The question jerked them back to action.

"An adrenalin heart injection," said Max. "Have you ever made one?"

"No," said Vladka. "Never had occasion to."

"Neither have I. Can you do it?"

"It's not difficult technically, but . . . my hands. . . . You'd better do it."

Max took the needle and felt for the fourth rib. Who would have thought that one day he would pierce his friend's heart to bring him back to life! He made the thrust and pressed the plunger.

"His pulse has come back," whispered Makar Ivanovich.

They waited.

"It's strengthening," said the old man in agitation.

"Give him an arm injection."

The movements of the four became even more precise. Suddenly Dasha glanced uneasily at the lamp.

"What time is it, Makar Ivanovich?" she asked.

"Quarter to twelve."

"Oh dear!"

"What's the matter?"

"The electricity is turned down at twelve."

Vladka looked up. There was at least half an hour of work ahead.

"Never mind, we'll light kerosene lamps," said Makar Ivanovich.

But the light was not turned down after twelve. The four people whose whole life was concentrated on the operating-table were not aware that the world beyond was waiting and looking towards them in hope. The town was not asleep. Dark figures were standing in groups watching the hospital windows shining through the birches. A car was standing waiting at the hospital door. From time to time the driver warmed the engine. Yegorov was sitting and smoking beside the telephone. Timosha was pacing back and forth at the power station, casting formidable glances at the members of the staff. A telephone call came from Crystal Promontory, asking if anything was wanted. A call came from the district hospital saying their head doctor was on his way to Kruglogorye. A call came from the sawmill . . . from the neighbouring aerodrome. . . . Skis swished through the darkness, horses trotted over the snow, trucks bounced over the ruts in the road. Everything was topsy-turvy on that March night.

"Finished," said Vladka.

He stepped aside and looked at Sasha's face. It still had a pale, cadaverous look, but there were indications that it was now the face of a sick and not a dead man. The four filed out into the waiting-room.

Yegorov's crutches thumped on the floor. Boris jumped to his feet. No one said a word, but their eyes were more eloquent than words. At this moment Max remembered where he had seen Boris before. He smiled at him.

"Better start training to receive Sasha's fast serve. Some wallop he's got."

"You mean he's going to pull through?" cried Boris and Yegorov in one breath. The doctors sat down without replying, enigmatic smiles on their lips. The pack of cigarettes went round. They lit cigarettes, avoiding one another's eyes. Boris and Yegorov understood and kept silent. It was hard to say anything coherent after what they had gone through that night. Max imagined that the weariness engulfing him all of a sudden was due to the few words of encouragement he had spoken to Boris. One tries to take hope from the encouragement one offers others. What would the morrow bring? Whatever it brought, they had lived through the night. They had done what had been required of them. For the first time in their lives they had been out there—on the borderland between life and death. They had waged a battle and returned tired, expended, but enriched with new knowledge. Now Sasha had to do his own fighting. They were gathered round, they were on the alert, but it was up to him now. Why were they silent? From exhaustion? No. The stunning effect of the most profound experience of their lives had to wear itself out.

Never would they forget this night. They had gone through it, and in doing so had found themselves. Now at last all was clear. In saving their friend's life they had come to understand the significance of their own lives. They were doctors. They would live and travel all over the globe, but wherever they were, wherever they went, it would be with the one purpose of saving men like themselves from the onslaughts of sickness and death. Their fellow-men—gay, wise, roving—welded together in the one great family of humankind. Everything else was of secondary importance. They were doctors. That had been told them a year before, but they had still looked upon themselves as just three young fellows.

"Where have I seen you before?" Max asked, looking narrowly at Yegorov.

Yegorov smiled and patted him on the back.

"We'll talk about that tomorrow. What you need now is a good rest."

## EVERYTHING LIES AHEAD

The morning dawned cold and hazy. Max sat huddled over Sasha's bed, gazing into his face. Faint colour seemed to be coming back to it. Or perhaps it was just the reflection of the sunrise. At any rate he was breathing evenly, his pulse was 64, his blood pressure 100/60.

Looks as if our side were going to win. Good for you, Sasha! You and I will have many a philosophical argument yet. We'll stroll together to the Petrograd Side, play volley-ball, go swimming. We'll confide our joys and sorrows to each other and go to the movies. In three years we'll meet again. Perhaps even sooner. We'll write to each other and exchange photographs. Everything lies ahead.

Max got up and went to the window. Fronds of frost spread over the pane, but only to the middle of the sash. He could see the shores of the lake in the distance with the sun hanging low over the horizon. Blue and pink shadows wove patterns on the ice. Soon the ice would begin to melt. Spring would come—a spring resembling hundreds of others, yet essentially different. That was a law, that was the endless cycle.

In former years, in former centuries there had been other Maximovs and Zelenins resembling the present ones, yet essentially different. Now it was their turn. After them would come new Maximovs and Zelenins resembling the present ones but essentially different. It was important that the new ones should remember them. Then the future would hold no terrors. They must do everything in their power to be remembered —not individually, but as a whole. Sasha was right. They must feel their oneness with the past and the future. Only in that way could they free themselves of the fear inspired by a contemplation of the inevit-

able parting with life. To achieve this was man's high calling. Otherwise life was either a vicious tragedy or a meaningless farce. We people of the socialist age ought to see this with particular clarity. And we must not be afraid of high-sounding phrases. The day is past when unscrupulous men could hide their crimes behind fine words. Today we face things squarely. We answer for our words. That's the main thing at present—to fight for the integrity of the written and spoken word, and of one's views and one's heart. As for discarded goods—to the rubbish heap with it!

In his mind's eye Max sees the lop-sided hut with the headlights focused on it, the drooping figure of the murderer, and the cordon of people surrounding him. There they were, workers, long-shoremen, lumberjacks, truck-drivers, militiamen, storming the old world. A world in which thugs brandish knives, where human life is not worth a pin, where people are governed by low passions. And all of us are advancing in this drive, a head-on drive that has been going on for almost half a century. We are united in a chain encircling the globe. We are attacking not only the evil outside us, but the evil that manifests itself within us as well. Cynicism, dissatisfaction, lack of faith—all products of the old world. They still live within us, and at times it may seem that they alone live within us. But that is not so, for we are people of the new age. We are fighting these evils and con-

quering them and keeping our place in the far-flung chain.

Max turned round and saw Vladka, Dasha, and some others standing in the doorway.

"Go to bed, Max," said Vladka. "We'll take your place."

Max went to the foot of the bed and stood looking at Sasha. And suddenly he realised that Sasha was looking at him.

"Max," said Sasha, "how am I?"

Max gripped the foot of the bed and said hoarsely:

"You're all right. You're still alive."

Vladka and Dasha came up. Sasha looked at them and smiled.

"All here? Greetings."

"Greetings," said Vladka.

"What about the woman having the baby?"

"She's all right, Makar Ivanovich delivered the baby," said Dasha.

Sasha nodded, shut his eyes, opened them again.

"I don't suppose you heard the Moscow broadcast, Inna was to. . . ."

"We heard it," said Vladka. "But stop talking. It's bad for you."

"I wanted to give you a surprise," said Sasha. "And missed it myself."

"We can put in a radio request," said Max. "Perhaps they made a recording."

"They must have of such playing," said Vladka.

"That's right; that's what we'll do," said Sasha and closed his eyes again.

"A radio request from the sailors of the Pacific Fleet," said Max.

"And the Arctic Fleet," said Vladka.

"And the people of Kruglogorye," put in Dasha.

"And the workers at Crystal Promontory," came the deep bass voice of Timosha from the doorway.

## *TO THE READER*

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The June and July issues (1960) of the popular Soviet monthly *Youth* carried the novel *Colleagues*. It immediately won fame for its author, Vasily Aksyonov, a young doctor. In this, his first novel, he writes about his medical colleagues, their hopes and aspirations, doubts and misgivings, loves and adventures.

"Who are they? This is how they would fill in a form:

"Year of Birth: 1932

"War Service: None

"Family Status: Single."

The story begins when the three young men who are the main characters graduate from Medical School. One of them goes to work in the country, the other two become ship's surgeons. The charm of the book lies in its youthful spontaneity, its restless, bristling, challenging tone.

Vasily Aksyonov was born in 1932. After graduating from Medical School he worked first as a seaport quarantine doctor, then as a general practitioner in the Far North. His personal experiences form the matter of which he writes. Recently he completed his second novel, also about Soviet young people.

Regardless of their calling, his heroes are invariably people of his own generation, energetic young people with the doubts, searchings, and enthusiasms of youth, deeply in love with life and their work.